New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1954

Volume XV, Number 6 • Rachel W. Coffin, *Editor* • Week of April 12, 1954

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**Asterisks indicate shows scheduled to play week of April 12, 1954*

Theatre Critics' Reviews brings you each week the complete reviews as they originally appeared in these New York newspapers.

NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES

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"The Magic and the Loss"

The New York Times
April 10, 1954

Theatre: Problem Play

'Magic and the Loss' in Debut at the Booth

By BROOKS ATKINSON

IN "The Magic and the Loss," which was acted at the Booth last evening, Julian Funt has written a private problem play. Although admirably acted, skillfully directed and put on with general good taste, it never becomes part of the public domain. It is as if the fourth wall should not have been removed.

These comments are made with respect for Mr. Funt's ability to find the sensitive spots in his characters. "The Magic and the Loss" examines the troubled spirit of a lad whose parents are divorced. He is living with his mother in a handsome apartment in Washington Square. She is an ambitious laborer in a Madison Avenue advertising emporium. She seems also to be on the point of marrying another one of the hands.

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All the adults in the play are fairly able to take care of themselves. They are generally civilized; divorced mother, divorced father and the new suitor behave pretty well on the whole. But the boy is wounded by his mother's infatuation with her new beau and by his long separation from his father.

The situation provides some tender moments, largely because the acting is so good. For Michael Gordon has directed the play thoughtfully and well. As the mother, Uta Hagen gives an uncommonly beautiful performance. She has resolved the several emotional conflicts of the part into the single portrait of a woman who is both sensitive and calculating, glib and worldly in her business world, but thoroughly devoted to her son. Although the part is not easy she makes it look easy and spontaneous on the stage. Miss Hagen is a very gifted actress.

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In the part of the father, Robert Preston is also at the top of his form. There is nothing superficial about him. He is thoroughly aware of the emotional currents that run under the surface of the script. Lee Bowman plays the Madison Avenue suitor neatly and pleasantly. As a middle-aged business woman on the downgrade professionally, Edith Meiser contributes a little gem of portraiture. The surface of the character is crumpled, but the interior is blazing with desperation and hatred. As Nicki, the boy, Charles Taylor gives one of those defenseless though manly performances that are always honest and touching.

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Despite the distinction of the group performance, "The Magic and the Loss" never moves outside a circumscribed area of private concern. It is like a case history in child psychology. The background is cold and remote. Ralph Alswang's setting of a modern apartment in the best modern taste is as alluring as a feature article in a magazine on smart living. There is a spectacular picture window. There are also prints by Picasso and Toulouse-Lautrec. There are no blemishes in it anywhere.

Like the setting, the play is immaculate. It is also self-contained. It is difficult to feel much more than a detached respect and occasional sympathy for the characters on the stage. Nicki is a nice boy and his problems are genuine. But they are the private concern of his mother and father. Even when the fourth wall is removed the public can't do much about them.

"THE MAGIC AND THE LOSS"

Play by Julian Funt; staged by Michael Gordon; setting by Ralph Alswang; costumes by Jocelyn; presented by Alexander H. Cohen and Mr. Alswang at the Booth Theatre, April 9, 1954. The cast:

Nicki Wilson.... Charles Taylor
Al Massio.....Danny Dennis
Grace Wilson.....Uta Hagen
Anita Harmon.....Edith Meiser
Larry Graves.....Lee Bowman
George Wilson..Robert Preston

NEW YORK Herald Tribune
April 10, 1954

THEATER

'The Magic and the Loss'

By WALTER F. KERR

I KNOW I'm a hard man, but I don't want to have to feel sorry for any more women for at least six months. In the old days we used to be asked to shed a tear for the fair sex because they didn't have women's rights—then loosely defined as jobs of their own, apartments of their own, and perhaps sideline lovers of their own. In "The Magic and the Loss," which wept its way into the Booth last night, we are asked to mourn for that same put-upon sex, this time because they do have jobs, apartments, and lovers of their own. As I see it, the ladies have got us coming and going. Somehow or other women's rights have been turned into women's wrongs, and will we once more get out our handkerchiefs, please?

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In point of fact, this reverse-switch on the old army game is rather quietly, perhaps even discreetly presented at the Booth. The Alexander Cohen-Ralph Alswang production is unaggressively mounted; Mr. Alswang's setting—a brown-and-gold Washington Square apartment—is neither more nor less spectacular than a working girl's castle ought to be. Director Michael Gordon has kept his actor's voices low, their manners reasonable. No one shouts; no one ever quite whines; everybody sympathizes with everybody else very decently.

And the suffering is most honestly managed by Uta Hagen. Miss Hagen, as everyone knows, is an excellent actress. Again and again a flash of understanding illuminates the stage: a look of guilt on her face as her teen-age son interferes with a tryst, a slackness in her walk as she is trapped into serving her son whiskey, a faltering smile as she fails to carry off an embarrassed pleasantry.

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But behind author Julian Funt's tidy, matter-of-fact prose, and in spite of the wholly human embellishments Miss Hagen is able to add on her own, there is no real person. Grace Wilson is, we are told, a career girl, desperately shooting for a Madison Avenue vice-presidency. She has long since chucked her scholarly husband, accusing him of "resignation and withdrawal" in his preference for a college campus. She has reared their son, she is dallying with a nicely-mannered gent from the advertising agency in which she works, she is a confidante of a fiftyish professional woman who is beginning to crack up.

She is, in fact, a statistic. And as her troubles begin to descend upon her in Act Two, they descend with a statistical regularity. At one moment she learns that her son has begun to despise her. At the next she is out of the running for that vice-presidency. At the very next her office boy-friend drops in to drop her. The hard, hard way of the professional woman is neatly, proficiently charted, with every detail in place. But "The Magic and the Loss" is only a careful illustration; its characters never do take on any personal tang, any inner tone, any private emotional power.

• • •

If there had been this sort of dramatic force beneath Mr. Funt's carefully muted dialogue, the players at the Booth must surely have drawn it out. They are one and all excellent. Robert Preston's level-headed college professor is a placid and persuasive figure. Mr. Preston is sometimes asked to work over lines that might have been lifted from a sociological text ("In your case," he says to his former wife, "work was in competition with the home") but he finds lifelike inflections for nearly all of them. Lee Bowman, as the dapper lover of the moment, is plausibly charming as he tries to strike up an edgy friendship with a rebellious boy; but the author throws him over in a mechanical second-act and he must exit as a one-dimensional scoundrel. Edith Meiser has two nicely controlled scenes as an over-age reject from the Madison Ave. mills, and Danny Dennis is fine as a neighborhood lad with a passion for beer and a horror of writing an entire letter to any one.

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None of these performances is more interesting, though, than Charles Taylor's as the confused son of a decidedly confused mother. Mr. Taylor is frequently touching as he tries to find his place in an elusive world; and he is very funny indeed as he pantomimes his way through the elaborate ritual of hauling himself out of bed.

But the acting can only give a casual veneer to "The Magic and the Loss." It cannot turn its steady self-pity into genuinely moving theater.

New York Post

April 11, 1954

By Richard Watts Jr.

The Career Woman and Her Child

Although I doubt if it has any such conscious intention, it is quite possible that the theater is going to make progressive education pretty unpopular among playgoers. On Wednesday night, in "Apniversary Waltz," there were two obnoxious children who were described as coming from a progressive school. Now, in a play called "The Magic and the Loss," which opened Friday night at the Booth, there is another irritating youngster from the same sort of institution, although he is aided and abetted by a disagreeable boy who haunts a public school.

If it goes on like this much longer, I predict that, not only will progressive schools come into considerable disrepute, but the entire corps of child actors is likely to find itself in disfavor. It isn't that these youthful performers are untalented. On the contrary, it is because they play their roles with such chilling realism that they give away the truth about young characters whom naive playwrights think are loveable. I long for the return of young Iris Mann, who brilliantly enacts children who are frankly intended to be sinister.

Office Love

In defense of Julian Funt, who wrote "The Magic and the Loss," it should be noted that his play is not basically about children. He is writing of the joys and sorrows, chiefly the latter, of career women in the advertising business, and it seems to be his general impression that they have a bad time. It's the men in their racket who are chiefly to blame. Either these suave scoundrels make love to them and then cast them aside, or they are ignored as being lacking in sexual appeal, whereupon they take to drink and are fired. You'll find examples of both cases in Mr. Funt's play, in addition to that sullen progressive child.

His central figure is the girl who is presumably successful in both business and love. At least, she is being considered for a top job in the firm, and, although her husband has left her to go off and teach in a college, she is having an affair with a cad from the office. At least, he's supposed to be a cad, but I, for one, couldn't find it in my heart to blame him for running away from his romance, since it seems to have included getting along with that difficult offspring.

It is my impression that Mr. Funt, at one time in the course of writing his story, had in mind a lot of possibly pertinent things about the problems of the career women. As currently presented, however, his play is so concerned with the heroine's efforts to get her son and lover to behave amicably, with the added complication of the return of the beloved father of the boy, that his theme rather became side-tracked. But the chief trouble with the play is that neither its characters nor its incidents come to interesting dramatic life.

Robert Preston, a valuable man in anyone's play, brings considerable persuasion to the role of the sympathetic ex-husband, and I thought Lee Bowman made the advertising man more sympathetic than the author perhaps intended. Uta Hagen gives another of her conscientious characterizations as the mother, and Edith Meiser has two effective scenes as the ageing career woman turned alcoholic. The two child actors, Charles Taylor, the progressive boy, and Danny Dennis, the one from public school, are only too realistic. I fear it's all a little tedious.

Journal-American

April 10, 1954

Divorced Mother Has Son Problem

By JOHN McCLAIN

THE PROBLEMS of a divorced career woman and her teen-age son are given an intelligent and often moving consideration in "The Magic and the Loss," a new play by Julian Funt which opened last night at the Booth Theatre.

That it failed to achieve any lasting emotional depth may be due to the fact that the issues involved didn't come across with sufficient impact; or that what happened to the people failed to emerge as a matter of adequate importance.

Uta Hagen, an advertising executive, lives with her 14-year-old son in a smallish apartment and endeavors to guide his life, her career, and a blooming romance with another employe of her agency. This is more than even a lady huckster can handle, and it is further complicated when her ex-husband, Robert Preston, drops in for a short visit in New York.

When the lad learns that his mother has been intimate with her suitor, he turns against her and pleads to be allowed to go home with his father. And when she begs him to stay he runs away. Getting as far as New Brunswick, N. J., he comes to the realization that his mother needs him more than his father, and he returns. But now his mother comes to the equal realization that he would be better off with his father, after all.

Decent People

Maybe it's difficult, or impossible, to become carried away with the love life of a brittle business woman; maybe her son's predicament is something less than catastrophic. Both mother and father are decent, attractive people with enough money to take good care of him—he gets a fair shake either way. And the mother is so obviously consumed with becoming vice-president of her firm that one cannot believe his loss will shatter her life. One is not moved.

On the other hand the story is told with a certain honesty that is constantly beguiling; these people of Mr. Funt's speak and operate modestly and rationally—just like real people. The business lady is feminine and normal, the ex-husband is neither stuffy nor resentful; even the lover, the cad, has a quite plausible point of view in fleeing from a situation beyond his control.

There are only six players in the show and they are excellent. Uta Hagen plays the career-mother with restraint and authority, making a game effort with this split personality.

Cast All Good

Robert Preston, the ex-husband, reveals himself once again as a highly skilled performer; and Lee Bowman, another welcome fugitive from Hollywood, is entirely capable and ingratiating as the meanie. Edith Meiser has a couple of good scenes as a washed-up ad-girl; Charles Taylor, playing the son, nearly runs away with the proceedings when he declares his allegiance to his pa, and Danny Dennis paints a convincing portrait of a leather-jacket delinquent.

I thought Michael Gordon's direction was excellent when he didn't drive people off into corners where I couldn't hear them, and certainly Ralph Alswang (also co-producer) created a believable apartment living room for Miss Hagen and her son.

I guess everybody in "The Magic and the Loss" is just too nice—that's the trouble.

DAILY NEWS

April 10, 1954

'The Magic and the Loss' Almost Makes the Grade as Good Drama

By JOHN CHAPMAN

If there were a play in "The Magic and the Loss," which opened last evening at the Booth Theatre, I'd be inclined to vote it as the season's best when the Critics Circle meets next Tuesday afternoon to distribute the annual honors. There is excellent quality in this production—in the writing by Julian Funt, in the direction by Michael Gordon and in the acting by Uta Hagen, Robert Preston, a boy named Charles Taylor and others. But all of these good things seemed pointless to me last evening because I never was able to determine either the purpose or the direction of the drama. Let's hope that I am stupid, and that others more alert and attuned will divine what "The Magic and the Loss" is definitely about.

Certainly I can gain no clue from the title. Ben Washer, the press man for producers Alexander H. Cohen and Ralph Alswang, was helpful enough to tip critics off in advance that the play's title comes from a quotation from Thomas Wolfe, who wrote a million of them at least. This quotation — from what slice of Wolfe prose Washer does not state—goes, "Her life was like a great wave breaking in the lonely sea: oh, the wonder, the magic and the loss."

Plenty of Loss.

Her life, in the case of the drama, is Miss Hagen's. She is a bright, sleek advertising woman, divorced from the studious Mr. Preston, who has Lee Bowman as a lover and colleague and a 14-year-old son—the aforementioned Charles Taylor. For a large part of the evening the boy is sore at life in general because he doesn't have a father and at his mother in particular because she has a new interest in a new man. This is not a happy story, for in the end the woman loses both her son and her lover and gains only a promotion in her advertising agency; but frequently it is an emotionally moving story, thanks to the writing, the direction and the actress.

One might expect an admirer of Thomas Wolfe to slop a stage all over with words, but Julian Funt does the opposite. His drama and his dialogue are spare and terse. The conversation in "The Magic and the Loss" is artful in its simplicity and intelligence.

A Good Company.

Miss Hagen, who has become quite a specialist in portraying bright but rueful women, is giving a very plain, intelligent and luminous performance as the woman. Not once does she step out of the narrow bounds of the drama or stray from its minor and melancholy key. She is an admirable actress.

And everybody plays right along with her—Preston as the ex-husband, Bowman as the admirer, Edith Meiser as a friend who drops in just to break up the play a bit, and young Taylor as the boy. Taylor's is the most serious and delicate role of all—that of a bewildered lad who has lost his father and is losing his mother—and he handles it manfully. There is another boy in the cast, playing a tough kid from the neighborhood, who should be mentioned. He is Danny Dennis, and he does very well. Danny rates attention, not only for a nice little job, but also because he is a student of the High School of Performing Arts, which is part of this city's public school system.

"The Magic and the Loss" does not strike me as a complete and satisfying drama, but I can't quarrel with it—and I'd like to predict that Julian Funt will make a solid contribution to the theatre almost any season now. He has the skill and the heart and what he needs now is a more clearly defined point or purpose.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

April 10, 1954

'Magic and Loss' Opens at Booth

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

A very modern problem provides a central theme in "The Magic and the Loss" which opened at the Booth last night. It is the troublesome reconciliation of professional and domestic instincts in a business woman.

The play is a sober dramatization of a human and understandable case. It never goes very deep or moves you very much, because it is told with such polite restraint. It is simply not theatrical enough.

Uta Hagen gives one of her most sympathetic performances as the advertising executive mother. She is handsome and clever. Her trouble begins when her teenage son discovers she has found more mature love than he can give her.

The crisis comes at a time when her divorced husband is trying, by fairest means, to take the boy to his home for a while.

Familiar Figure.

The woman also goes through professional suspense, hoping to get a promotion which will involve the dismissal of a pathetic predecessor.

This central figure is a familiar one in Manhattan life. She believes in a double standard, both sides of which benefit her. She wants the world to treat her as a woman. But she wants to treat the world as if she were a man.

She is humorless and officious. Because she is tired, she is aggressive and sarcastic. But because she is still very female, she is always defensive at being accused of competing in a man's world. Among many other businesses, television is particularly revealing of this chilly discontent.

Miss Hagen plays this creature of unhappy contradictions with remarkable persuasiveness. Like the rest of the cast, she acts with realistic delicacy, demanded by the nature of the script.

No Outbreaks.

The play lacks outbursts. High points are managed in a tone of drawing-room repression, which is undoubtedly typical and honest in this sort of intellectual society.

You wish somebody would get vulgar for a couple of minutes. Vulgarity makes good theater. So does physical action which is at a minimum here.

Recalling the sweep of Miss Hagen's performances in "Streetcar" and "Joan," you wish "The Magic and the Loss" would grip its problem with more flamboyance. It would profit by being less civilized.

Young Charles Taylor, as the son, joins the long line of juvenile actors who somehow score like veterans in complex roles. He is believable and sympathetic. He also provides the grownups with their few stirring emotional moments.

Robert Preston scores an ingratiating success as the boy's worried father. It seemed to me that Lee Bowman, as the mother's amorous prospect, was forced to tip his hand too early in the play. But he gives the part the quiet callous charm it wants.

Edith Meiser is striking as the aging executive, and Danny Dennis has some sharp moments as an uninhibited youngster.

A Dependable, Accurate Source of Information of the American Theatre

NEW YORK

THEATRE CRITICS' REVIEWS

Daily Mirror

April 10, 1954

'The Magic and the Loss' Is Honestly Dull

By ROBERT COLEMAN

'The Magic and the Loss" is the type of play you may not particularly enjoy, but must respect. It comes to grips with some important present-day problems, but doesn't manage to wrest enough from them. It darts too frequently from idea to idea, without developing them sufficiently.

AUTHOR JULIAN FUNT'S major proposition seems to be that men expect women to be compliant and submissive. Grace Wilson refused to be either. So her husband got a divorce and went West to teach. She got a job with an advertising agency, and started to climb up the ladder.

An executive of the firm has an affair with her for a while, finds her too aggressive, and takes a walk. When her former husband comes East to discuss an anthology with a book publisher, the teen-age son whom she has reared wants to go home with his dad. Grace just doesn't have any luck with her men.

Frankly, Grace might be something of a tartar to have around an office, but the males in her life seem to be pretty selfish and self-centered, too. The son, product of a progressive school, is a spoiled and disturbed kid. Discovering the affair between his mother and the advertising exec, he runs away. He returns home, a little more grown up, starts kissing instead of sassing mom, and then is overjoyed to go West with his dad.

* * *

AS FOR GRACE, it looks like she's going to be turned down for promotion because she's a woman. Facing life alone, this is the final blow. Then she is offered a vice-presidency with the company, when the man picked for the job wants too big a salary.

Producers Alexander H. Cohen and Ralph Alswang have given the play an excellent production. Uta Hagen is easy on the eyes and quite likable as the ambitious Grace. Somehow, we found ourselves in her corner, sympathizing with her. For she gives more than she gets.

Robert Preston is fine, too, as the ex-husband who prefers the security of the campus to nerve-wracking competition in the business world. Lee Bowman is just right as the advertising executive who cannot find romance with a potential rival. Edith Meiser has highly effective moments as a shattered victim of the war between the sexes.

CHARLES TAYLOR does more for the son than has author Funt. It is a difficult role, into which most of the meaning has to be put by its interpreter. Young Taylor meets the challenge with resource. And there is a good performance by Danny Dennis.

Co-producer Alswang has provided an atmospheric, modern setting, and Michael Gordon has directed with understanding though his pace is a bit too leisurely. It took him most of the first act to get things moving.

The characters in "The Magic and the Loss" offer interesting and provocative points of view, but somehow they leave us rather cold. They seem under-written, without enough corpuscles and vitamins. They toss ideas around as quickly as a magician does sponge balls, and seldom delve into them deeply.

Funt started with the materials for an intelligent, civilized and stimulating play. But he has failed to capitalize fully on them. Genuine warmth, a sustained mood and vitality are missing. The result is an honest play, honestly dull.

"By the Beautiful Sea"

DAILY NEWS

April 9, 1954

'By the Beautiful Sea' Gets Soggy

By JOHN CHAPMAN

The most charming movie I have seen in a good many years is "Genevieve," which is beside the point. The next most charming is the amateur documentary about the little boy on the lam in Coney Island, "Little Fugitive," and this is nearer the point. Last evening, at the Majestic Theatre, I felt somewhat like the Little Fugitive at the end of his picture—I was ready to go home and have somebody tuck me into bed. The Majestic's new musical, "By the Beautiful Sea," is a big, bold stage documentary about Coney at the Turn of the Century. It has roller-coasters, balloon ascensions, a Tunnel of Love and Shirley Booth. When Miss Booth was in the Tunnel of Love I was right there with her.

The authors of the libretto of "By the Beautiful Sea," Herbert and Dorothy Fields, have lashed up a story about a honky-tonk entertainer (Miss Booth) and a Shakespearean actor (Wilbur Evans) who become enamored in a Coney Island boarding house. Their Turn of the Century period gives Irene Sharaff, the costume maker, and Jo Mielziner, the scene designer, plenty of room and time to spread themselves, and they do. But mark my words: One of these days the Turn of the Century is going to turn on Broadway and cry, "Hold—enough!" There should be a period to a period.

Perfect Entertainer.

Miss Booth is, as always, an enchanting actress. When she is singing Dorothy Fields' wry lyrics of "I'd Rather Wake Up by Myself" or doing a Baby Snooks routine as a little girl who wants to remain an only child, she is a perfect entertainer.

Mielziner has spread himself on settings — but the one I enjoyed most was the Old Mill, or Tunnel of Love, number in which Miss Booth and Evans cruise through the dark while an occasional skeleton or luminous monster flits by.

Two Good Numbers.

Arthur Schwartz, the composer, has raised a lusty Coney racket in many of his numbers, and last night's audience liked very much the hot stuff sung by Mae Barnes. Unhappily, these were the times when I felt like the Little Fugitive. My favorite musical number is "Coney Island Boat," a fine chant sung in counterpoint with "In the Good Old Summer Time."

Helen Tamiris, the dance director, has mustered a handsome and agile crew of dancers, and in the second act they are permitted to cut loose in an excellent big number, "Throw the Anchor Away." In this and in a couple of other moments I liked the work of a minor singer and comedienne, Mary Harmon.

Although I did have a bit of fun, I came away from the Majestic last evening feeling that Coney Island is too big for Schwartz, the Fieldses, Mielziner, the Little Fugitive and me.

"BY THE BEAUTIFUL SEA"

Musical with book by Herbert and Dorothy Fields, music by Arthur Schwartz, lyrics by Miss Fields; settings and lighting by Jo Mielziner; costumes by Irene Sharaff; musical direction by Jay Blackton; choreography by Helen Tamiris; staged by Marshall Jamison; presented by Robert Fryer and Lawrence Carr at the Majestic Theatre, April 8, 1954. The cast:

Quartet..John Dennis, Reid Shelton, Ray Hyson, Larry Laurence
Acrobats.....Ray Kirchner, Rex Cooper
Cora Belmont....Mary Harmon
Molly Belmont...Cindy Robbins
Lillian Belmont....Gloria Smith
Ruby Monk.....Mae Barnes
Mrs. Koch.....Edith True Case
Carl Gibson.....Cameron Prud'homme
Lottie Gibson.....Shirley Booth
Half-Note.....Robert Jennings
Diabolo.....Thomas Gleason
Baby Betsy Busch...Carol Leigh
Mickey Powers..Richard France
Dennis Emery....Wilbur Evans
Flora Busch.....Anne Francine
Willie Slater....Warde Donovan
Lenny.....Larry Howard
Sidney.....Eddie Roll
Mr. Curtis.....Paul Reed
Burt Mayer....Larry Laurence
Viola.....Gaby Monet

"By the Beautiful Sea"—*continued*

The New York Times

April 9, 1954

Shirley Booth Stars at the Majestic

By BROOKS ATKINSON

IN honor of Shirley Booth several appreciative folk have assembled a bountiful, warm-hearted musical show in a happy period. "By the Beautiful Sea," they call it. It opened at the Majestic last evening.

The period is 1900, and the locale is Coney Island. For the time being, Miss Booth is a vaudeville performer in love with a Shakespearean actor. Perhaps we had best hurry over the love hocus-pocus as rapidly as possible. For Miss Booth's heart is not seriously involved with Wilbur Evans' concert-stage portrait of a Shakespearean actor. No one is at his best in the rather soupy love interludes in this ample carnival.

But in other respects "By the Beautiful Sea" is a beguiling show. With a Coney Island setting Jo Mielziner has all the latitude he needs for gaiety and splendor. Irene Sharaff's elaborately beruffled costumes are wonderfully decorative. Helen Tamiris has staged some joyous choreography. And under Marshall Jamison's direction, "By the Beautiful Sea"—is, to quote a phrase in the dialogue, "an elegant spree" that makes the middle-class pleasures of a half century ago look inviting. It is lush, sentimental and light-hearted; and the sort of atmosphere in which Miss Booth can have a royal good time.

After the banal sort of musical comedy Broadway has been afflicted with this season, it is a pleasure to encounter a melodious score, like the one Arthur Schwartz has written here, and original lyrics, like the ones Dorothy Fields has composed. "Coney Island Boat," sung as a counter melody to "In the Good Old Summertime," is a mighty pleasant festival, topped off with an elated dance by Miss Booth and little Robert Jennings. "Happy Habit" is an exuberant number, sung with a kind of artful simplicity by Mae Barnes.

There are some other irresistible numbers, like "Good Time Charlie," which is another high-spirited production number, and "Hooray for George the Third," which is like an old-time jubilee. When Mae Barnes comes to a ballad called "Hang Up" the whole stage erupts into a humorous serenade. Mr. Schwartz and Miss Fields have collaborated on some good picnic song numbers. The staging and the performing give them an exultant spirit.

Let's agree that the book Herbert and Dorothy Fields have devised does not dance with the spirit that informs the rest of the show. Still it does get the performers on and off and it makes them look beguiling. There are acrobats, sailors, beer-garden waiters and Coney Island pleasure-seekers. Some of Miss Tamiris' dancers perform a vastly amusing burlesque of penny-arcade picture sketches. To the tune of "Throw the Anchor Away" a whole flock of dancers perform a parody hornpipe that is great fun. Nothing is wasted in "By the Beautiful Sea." The staging and the performing are lively and inventive.

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It would be difficult to find a more engaging period for Miss Booth's style of merriment. Those ornate and flowing costumes become her, and vice versa, for that matter. The whole background of homely innocence makes an excellent point of departure. Everyone has long since lost his heart to Miss Booth, who is a doll on either the dramatic or musical stage.

She is in great form "By the Beautiful Sea." Friendly, unassuming and good-humored, honest with the other performers as well as with the audience, she makes a Coney Island holiday out of her part. As a work of musical theatre, "By the Beautiful Sea" is no masterpiece. But it restores the era of good feeling to music on Broadway. Nothing done in this field this season has been so hospitable and sunny.

NEW YORK **Herald Tribune**

April 9, 1954

THEATER

'By the Beautiful Sea'

By WALTER F. KERR

It's Shirley's Sea

IN "By the Beautiful Sea," which opened at the Majestic Thursday, there is a splendid balloon, designed by Jo Mielziner, that sails right up off the ground. There is also a book by Herbert and Dorothy Fields that never does.

Between the airborne scenery and the earthbound book stands Shirley Booth, four-square against the world. After last night's exhibition, I think there can no longer be any reasonable doubt: Miss Booth is the champ.

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It doesn't matter to her that the things she is asked to do—fall in love with a Shakespearean actor, take him on a tour of Coney Island, finance him via a spectacular balloon ascension, and nearly lose him because his teen-age daughter is quite clearly an idiot—are always pedestrian and sometimes even incoherent. It doesn't matter to her that the show's lyrics never get a lot better than "I'd make your lips fit mine just like a glove." It doesn't worry her that the jokes run to "He's only broke from not having money."

She has come in for the evening to entertain, she has a very clear idea of how she's going to do it, and she does it with the least fuss imaginable. There is nothing pushy about this easygoing Duse's comic method. She strides cooly across the stage, flicks a finger at her feather boa, and coos out an epithet like "You're somewhat of a little stinker, aren't you?" with all the gentleness in the world. There is such kindness in this nasal voice that no gag ever comes down hard. There is so much warmth behind the blowzy facade that the most routine musical-comedy love scene takes on a sudden defiant shine.

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Miss Booth may be, in addition, the only performer in the world from whom a child cannot steal a scene. Early in the first act of "By the Beautiful Sea" a lively and appealing youngster named Robert Jennings goes into a waltz-clog version of a tune called "Coney Island Boat." Miss Booth joins him. In two seconds flat you've forgotten that Master Jennings is in the neighborhood. Not that the actress has used a single wile to snatch what mightn't belong to her. She's just there—with that radiant smile and that casual grace—and there's nothing anybody can do about it. Spotlights aren't necessary when Shirley Booth is glowing at center stage.

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Her special incandescence is put to frequent use in the new Arthur Schwartz musical, and that's lucky. In addition to taking candy from the kids and passing it on to the customers, she is to be found rocking her way through a Tunnel of Love sequence replete with flying monsters, tearing down the house with a comic lament called "I'd Rather Wake Up by Myself," and, as the piece de resistance of a second-act vaudeville show, piping out a Baby Snooks ballad detailing the more murderous instincts of the young.

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In taking on the burden of the show's laborious plotting, Miss Booth gets assistance from several quarters. The ample and energetic Mae Barnes, for instance, comes hot to rescue with a roaring tempo-tune known as "Hang Up!" A slighter number, "Happy Habit," gains enormous strength from Miss Barnes' willingness to hurl her large, cheerful, pliant form from wall to wall. Wilbur Evans sings a couple of pleasant Arthur Schwartz melodies agreeably enough, and Richard France shows a flash of style in a rather fleeting first-act duet.

The dancing, however, is on the skimpy side. Helen Tamiris has kept what there is of it suitably lively, but "By the Beautiful Sea" could leap to its feet more often than it does. The spectacular scenery—including a roller-coaster manipulated by light—is good, but not great, Mielziner.

What takes the Majestic's new show out beyond its depth, though, is its half-hearted, fumbling libretto. Shirley Booth can infuse everything she does with a personal authority that is both powerful and ingratiating. Arthur Schwartz can keep the score attractively melodic, even when the orchestration is turning disturbingly noisy. But even a musical ought to mean a little something, have half a thought in mind. This one has a terribly vacant look on its prettily painted face.

Daily Mirror

April 9, 1954

'By Beautiful Sea' Offers Lots of Robust Fun

By ROBERT COLEMAN

In "By The Beautiful Sea," Shirley Booth takes you on a tour of the boarding houses and bistros, amusement parks and palaces, of Coney Island in the early 1900s. Herbert and Dororthy Fields arranged the trek, to musical accompaniment by Arthur Schwartz. Robert Fryer and Lawrence Carr are the impresarios.

DURING THE pilgrimage, Miss Booth falls in love with a popular-priced Shakespearean actor, tosses off a few zingy steps with young Robert Jennings, has a romantic time of it on an Old Mill boat ride, parachutes from a balloon, straightens out a mixed-up girl and finally ends on the way to the Marriage License Bureau.

The Booth admirers are legion. They were out in full force Thursday evening at the Majestic Theatre to blister their palms applauding the wonderful Shirley as she hoofed, canaried, wisecracked, malaproped and romanced her way through the proceedings. Seldom has applause been more richly deserved, for she is a tower of strength to a pedestrian musical.

The book by Herbert and Dorothy Fields has a lot of hilarious moments, but it is hardly off their top shelf. The score by Schwartz is atmospheric and rather ordinary. "Alone Too Long" and "Happy Habit" loom as the outstanding candidates for the hit parade.

MAE BARNES, who used to be a dancer and now has become a top-flight song stylist, really goes to town with "Happy Habit" and "Hang Up." She knows what to do with a tune, how to belt out a rhythm. Her verve and good humor had the first-nighters cheering. Here is a star in the making for you.

Wilbur Evans is excellent as the debonair, debt-ridden interpreter of the Bard. Carol Leigh, Anne Francine, Richard France and Cameron Prud'homme are good in other roles.

Helen Tamiris has devised choreography with a sense of humor. Her satire on penny picture machines had the audience howling. A pert ballerina by the name of Lillian Donau explodes across the footlights like a rocket on the Fourth of July, in fact all the kids merit a unit citation.

JO MIELZINER, wonder boy of the scenic designers, has supplied appropriate period settings, while Irene Sharaff has contributed costumes that enhance the musical's mood. Marshall Jamison has directed the book to catch all its values. His takeoff on juvenile impersonators, done with terrific effect by Miss Booth, is rib-wrecking.

"By the Beautiful Sea" is a show that defies analysis. Take it apart, and the pieces don't add up to much. But it packs a big cargo of lusty laughs and irresistible high spirits. Lacking distinction in most departments, it still offers a lot of robust fun. Its good intentions, ingratiating cast, jet-plane pace and bounce atone for a lot of technical faults.

We do not recommend "By the Beautiful Sea" to you as a song-and-dance masterpiece. Truth to tell, it's just so-so. But we had a good time, and think you may, too. After all, Shirley Booth taking a sabbatical from the legit is really something to see. What a trouper! She almost hypnotizes you into believing that her vehicle is a gem of its kind.

Journal American

April 9, 1954

It's Worth Seeing

Only One Shirley Booth And This Is Her Show

By JOHN McCLAIN

"BY THE BEAUTIFUL SEA," which opened at the Majestic Theatre last night, is an opulent old time musical comedy, short on plot, long on names and music. It tears along fiercely and brilliantly for one act and then, unexpectedly, runs out of steam and coasts downhill to a slow and sodden finish.

It looks as though everyone concerned knocked himself out on the first hour-and-a-half and then played it all over again, rather desperately, to occupy the allotted time. It should be so much better than that.

For it has the immaculate services of Shirley Booth, a superb actress with a plaintive song style all her own; it has a first class score; an adequate and quite funny book; lavish scenery and effects, and a large and talented cast of singers, dancers and attendant personalities. But it hasn't got a thing called ACT TWO.

The story is laid in Coney Island at the turn of the century, centering around a theatrical boarding house run by Shirley Booth. She has fallen in love with Wilbur Evans, a Shakespearean actor, who is currently doing a bit in vaudeville.

But his teen-age daughter by a former marriage, a little horror, has taken a strident dislike to Miss Booth. This threatens to break up the impending nuptials until Miss Booth gives her some old clothes and wins her over. That may not be an entirely fair estimate of the plot, but it's enough to show you the way around.

To fill out this meagre scenario there are of course episodes along the Midway, in the Old Mill, at the Dreamland Casino and inside the Brighton Beach Vaudeville Theatre. There is even an elaborate balloon ascension.

Miss Booth takes charge of the proceedings early with a rollicking tune called "The Sea Song." This is followed in quick succession by "Old Enough to Love," a swingy ingenue-boy bit, "Coney Island Boat," a production number sung as a counter melody to "Good Old Summertime," charmingly delivered by Miss Booth and, finally, "Alone Too Long," the big pop song of the show from the capable larynx of Mr. Evans.

The pace is good at this point and Mae Barnes, a large colored lady, stops the show dead with something entitled "Happy Habit." (You know, it's a happy habit to spend money, to love, to eat, etc. etc—so don't give it up. That's the idea.) Then comes an agreeable little ballet, "Good Time Charley" and, just before the close of the act, Miss Booth's best number, "I'd Rather Wake Up By Myself."

The curtain descends on the balloon ascension and a big extravaganza bearing the odd title, "Hooray for George the Third" (if it hadn't been for him we wouldn't have had the Fourth of July—get it?)

Lacked Hope

That's quite an act, by and large—maybe too good. In any case the only thing to recommend the rest of the show is another number by Mae Barnes—"Hang Up" (if the devil calls)—a good ballad. "More Love Than Your Love," sung by Mr. Evans, and a bright little scene played by Miss Booth and Carol Leigh.

Otherwise it's largely reprises and Miss Booth's vaudeville bit which, unfortunately, I didn't find particularly rousing. Even the finale lacked the traditional hoop-la.

Arthur Schwartz wrote the music, with lyrics by Dorothy Fields, and I think they contributed nobly; Herbert and Dorothy Fields delivered the book, and I only wish they hadn't folded up coming into the homestretch.

Jo Mielziner turned out one of his big garish jobs with the sets and lights and Helen Tamiris directed the dances with humor and ingenuity.

There is only one Shirley Booth and this is her show; so I think it's worth seeing most of the time.

New York Post

April 9, 1954

By Richard Watts Jr.

Shirley Booth at Coney Island

Whatever became of the book of "By the Beautiful Sea"? The new musical comedy, which opened last night at the Majestic Theater, has, to begin with, the inestimable head start of offering Shirley Booth in its central role. It has also a characteristically bright and charming score by Arthur Schwartz and some agreeable lyrics by Dorothy Fields. There is another advantage in the nostalgic background of Coney Island at the beginning of the century, with colorful settings by Jo Mielziner. It even shows the wonderful Miss Booth making a balloon ascension.

With all of these virtues, it seems to me that it should be a far more satisfactory show than it managed to be last evening. And I can't help thinking the book is chiefly to blame. Since the narrative is scanty to the point of being non-existant, it can at least be given the credit of not being particularly obtrusive. But, in addition to being of no especial help to the proceedings, it manages to serve as an interruption to the musical numbers, and I can't help thinking all would have been better had it been done away with altogether.

Variety Show

Attempting to be constructive for a change, I even venture to suggest that "By the Beautiful Sea" might have been quite entertaining if it had been presented frankly as a period vaudeville show without even the pretence of a libretto. As a matter of fact, it could have been managed easily, since Miss Booth appears as a variety performer, her leading man is an itinerant Shakespearean actor, the minor characters are show people, and the entire setting is that of the Coney Island amusement parks in an amiably colorful day.

Since, as everyone has come to recognize, Miss Booth happens to be one of the finest actresses in the American theater, the idea of doing away with a story for her might seem to represent a shameful waste of her talents, but I doubt it. For it is among her greatest virtues that she can be warm, genuine and immensely moving even when she is doing a comic song, getting ready for her balloon ascension or offering one of the specialty numbers in a variety act. Indeed, I thought she was least happy in a presumably serious romantic interlude with Wilbur Evans.

The Score

As usual, the score that Mr. Schwartz has composed for "By the Beautiful Sea" is not only warm and tuneful but has the proper suggestion of its nostalgic period. All of the songs are pleasant, and I recall particularly "The Sea Song," "Coney Island Boat" and a pair of numbers sung by the somewhat rotund Mae Barnes. The dances, staged by Helen Tamaris, are simple, but seem in the proper mood. But the book will try to emerge from time to time with little wispy suggestions of a plot that fade away as mysteriously as they appear.

Miss Booth is, of course, the dominating member of the cast, not merely because she is the star but also through the richly touching quality of her presence. Miss Barnes, however, momentarily makes the show her own when she is singing "Happy Habit" or, particularly, "Hang Up." Mr. Evans brings his fine singing voice to the colorless business of the Shakespearean actor, and a boy named Robert Jennings adds some needed vitality in his brief appearance. Carol Leigh is an attractive ingenue. But "By the Beautiful Sea" is Shirley Booth and the Schwartz songs.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

April 9, 1954

'Beautiful Sea' Adds To Shirley's Laurels

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

Shirley Booth is the star of the new musical at the Majestic known as "By the Beautiful Sea." This is no vehicle.

The honors won by Miss Booth never come from spotlights, gleaming entrances or carefully protected routines. She is adored because of her warm, personal quality, her contagious gaiety and the great good taste that keeps her from putting pressure on the audience.

The well-meaning experts who built "By the Beautiful Sea" rarely protect the star. Conspicuous songs go to supporting players. Miss Booth is asked to follow thunderous numbers with subdued pathos.

Yet she finishes the evening undisputedly stellar. It is a triumph of mime over clatter.

Impudent Acts.

Not that Shirley Booth is entirely without material in this saga of Coney Island in the 1900s. She leads a nice, gay, title song, dancing it with a hefty comedienne, then a little boy, as her partners.

She does some delightfully impudent singing of "In the Good Old Summer Time" against a jazzy new tune by the chorus. She does a wry little number in front of the curtain about rueful love and ends the first act jumping out of a balloon in a parachute.

In the second act she reprises two songs introduced by her supporting players. She adds a vaudeville turn, the classic wicked infant, beloved of Rae Dooley and Fannie Brice. Very funny she is at it, too.

Quiet Scene.

Near the end she plays a quiet scene with a neurotic little girl. It is so deft, so comical, that without your knowing it she gathers you into the palm of her hand. A moment later in the finale she proves she can look more luscious than any chorus girl half her age.

This is a remarkable performance, maybe a unique one. If you want to know what really being a star is, see Shirley Booth in "By the Beautiful Sea." She is a million-dollar value in show business. This musical often tucks that gold into a sock under a mattress, instead of investing it.

Despite all that, she blithely pays off.

Second in line for kudos is Mae Barnes, buxom Negro singer from night clubs, who comes back to the theater after a good many seasons. Her two songs, "Happy Habit" and "Hang Up," are show stoppers.

Wilbur Evans sounds fine as the Shakespearean ham beloved of the vaudevillian Miss Booth. He is vocally smooth with "Alone Too Long" and "More Love Than Your Love," both likely winners.

Juvenile Roles.

Robert Jennings is a lively, pint-sized dancer, and the personable juveniles are Carol Leigh and Richard France. Helen Tamiris has enlivened the stage with some Penny Movies and a big, rip-roaring dance.

Jo Mielziner's Coney Island is a festive candy jar and the Irene Sharaff costumes bring along their own gay laughs.

Shirley Booth has already been named the World's Best Actress. "By the Beautiful Sea" adds the title of the Theater's Best Sport.

"Anniversary Waltz"

Daily Mirror

April 8, 1954

'Anniversary Waltz' Is Off to a Merry Whirl

By ROBERT COLEMAN

Joseph M. Hyman and Bernard Hart brought a hilariously giddy and very human comedy called "Anniversary Waltz" to the Broadhurst Theatre Wednesday evening. Jerome Chodorov and Joseph Fields are the authors of the merry whirl. Moss Hart, a clever man with a typewriter himself, has pushed the keys aside this time to direct for them.

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IT HAS BECOME axiomatic in the theatre that comedies about family life, with characters that are recognizable, and loaded with solid laughs springing from good situations, are almost invariably destined for success. The Broadhurst's new tenant has all those essentials for a resounding hit.

It has to do with a nice, typical American couple with teenage kids. Like just about everyone else you know, they find it difficult to meet their bills and put anything by for a rainy day. They are so busy coping with the challenge of everyday life, that they have too little time for romance. They have their spats and reconciliations.

Naturally, their 15th wedding anniversary has to be hectic. Papa has to bust up a few television sets, and Mama has to get very mad with him when daughter Debbie, a progressive school pupil, spills some family secrets on a tell-all panel show. Grandpa and grandma stick their necks in and get them whacked. But the ending is happy, as it always is for fundamentally decent and likable people.

* * *

"ANNIVERSARY WALTZ" doesn't strive to be startlingly original, but it does manage to be believable, warming and humorous. That what it has to say is true was proved by the running comments of a lady just across the aisle from us: "That's right!" "You can say that again!" "They're not kidding!" She seemed to be delighted to learn that other folks have their troubles, too.

Macdonald Carey, absent from Broadway since "Lady in the Dark," is wonderful as the harassed husband who hates TV. And Kitty Carlisle is no less wonderful as his sympathetic but also harassed wife. This, incidentally, marks Miss Carlisle's debut in a straight play. It is a most auspicious one for the former musical comedy star.

Phyllis Povah and Howard Smith are credible and ingratiating as the older generation. Smith, one of our favorite character actors, was suffering from laryngitis, but, fine trouper that he is, came through nobly. Warren Berlinger and Mary Lee Dearring are excellent as the well-informed kids.

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SALUTES ARE also due Pauline Myers, Andrew Duggan, Jean Carson and Don Grusso. Miss Myers takes the stock comedy maid and, with a fascinatingly expressive face, lets you know that she's hep to what's going on.

Moss Hart has staged "Anniversary Waltz" with skill, pace and understanding. Not a single chuckle, not a robust laugh, has he missed. And Frederick Fox has provided another of his attractive sets.

"Anniversary Waltz," in sum, is a show that realizes its own merit, being courageous enough to open just as the hot weather is about to descend upon us. That it will beat the heat, we are sure. The customers should be working up a sweat trying to buy tickets for it. It looms as a box-office champ.

Winchell says: "Very funny show. Happy anniversaries!"

"ANNIVERSARY WALTZ"

Comedy by Jerome Chodorov and Joseph Fields; staged by Moss Hart; setting and lighting by Frederick Fox; costumes by Robert Mackintosh; presented by Joseph M. Hyman and Bernard Hart at the Broadhurst Theatre, April 7, 1954. The cast:

Millie.....Pauline Myers
Okkie Walters.....Warren Berlinger
Alice Walters....Kitty Carlisle
Debbie Walters.....Mary Lee Dearring
Bud Walters..Macdonald Carey
Chris Steelman..Andrew Duggan
Janice Revere.....Jean Carson
Harry.....Don Grusso
Sam.....Donald Hylan
Mr. Gans.....Howard Smith
Mrs. Gans.....Phyllis Povah
Handyman.....Terry Little

Journal American

April 8, 1954

Achieves High Hilarity Level

By JOHN McCLAIN

AT last the theatre has good reason to be thankful for television, for were it not for this controversial invention Jerome Chodorov and Joseph Fields, authors of "Anniversary Waltz" which opened at the Broadhurst last night, would have been stuck with a trifling and repetitive little domestic comedy.

As it is, and almost entirely due to the shennanigans revolving in and about a 27-inch console, I believe they have a hit.

Endless effort is devoted from the opening curtain to interest the audience in the old situation of a devoted couple struggling to keep their love alive despite a couple of progressive children and the usual comedy in-laws. This familiar vehicle threatens to run out of juice early in the proceedings, and is only saved by the bell. In this case it is the doorbell announcing the arrival of a TV set.

Star of Show

The same device rescues a rather sustained yawn in the second act, and from then on the authors are ingenious enough never to get beyond eye- or ear-shot of the mechanical monster. I didn't stay after the final curtain to see if they brought the set out for a bow, but if they didn't they were guilty of neglecting the star of the show.

Almost before "Anniversary Waltz" got through the first few bars I found myself somewhat shaken by the premise that the world totters and falls because two people who had been married for fifteen years suddenly reveal that they had been intimate prior to their wedding.

This is the gimmick that causes a rift with the in-laws, precipitates all manner of strange behavior on the part of the teenage kids and nearly busts up the home. I hardly consider myself a member of the mad young jet set — but really!

Shortly after this, however, the young husband kicks the hell out of the TV set his father-in-law has given him, and henceforth, except for the lapses mentioned above, the evening maintains a reasonably high level of hilarity to the finish.

Kitty Carlisle, making her first Broadway appearance in a non-musical show is thoroughly assured and engaging as the beleaguered wife and MacDonald Carey, the husband, gives a bright and sympathetic performance.

Phyllis Povah and Howard Smith contribute heroically to the rather stereotyped roles of the in-laws. Pauline Myers is a good comedy maid and Andrew Duggan and Jean Carson have a few bright moments as Carey's partner and a client.

And of course there are the kids. In this instance they are played by Warren Berlinger and Mary Lee Dearring and, as usual, they are magnificent.

Moss Hart directed the festivities with a droll and fluid hand, and appears to have converted his wife, Miss Carlisle, into a first-class comedienne without breaking up HIS home. Frederick Fox has contrived a tasteful and convincing drawing room overlooking the East River.

"Anniversary Waltz" should attract the large audience of people who love television — and the even larger one of those who would often like to kick it to death.

The New York Times

April 8, 1954

Theatre: 'Anniversary Waltz' Opens

Family Rumpus Shown in Three Acts

By BROOKS ATKINSON

IN "Anniversary Waltz," which was acted at the Broadhurst last evening, Jerome Chodorov and Joseph Fields have combined two comedy staples. They are (1) the "Mama Love Poppa?" joke, (2) the mother-in-law joke. There are some other staple products along the course, but these are the fundamentals.

Many people in the audience last evening roared as though "Baby Mine" had reopened in a double-feature with "Is Zat So?" Maybe "Anniversary Waltz" supplies some deep spiritual need of the times. But this playgoer left the theatre under the lugubrious impression of having seen a mechanical comedy that the authors had managed to put together without writing a single line. Given the two main jokes, everything else falls into place automatically.

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When the comedy opens Alice Walters and Bud Walters, parents of two, are just about to celebrate their fifteenth wedding anniversary. People are naturally astonished to be in the presence of a couple married that long without interruption. Now Mr. Chodorov and Mr. Fields proceed to break the magic spell. Father-in-law and mother-in-law arrive for dinner, and things begin to fall apart immediately. For, of course, Bud Walters despises his wife's parents.

There does not seem to be any necessity of reporting every detail in the family rumpus. It follows an ancient pattern hackwork, including the announcement of Alice Walters' third pregnancy in the last scene.

But the authors have made one contribution. Since Bud Walters is allergic to television, they bestow a television set on him by way of an anniversary present. In a fit of domestic temper he kicks in the screen at the end of the first act. He kicks in the screen of a replacement set at the end of the second act. A third set turns up in the third act, but the curtain happily comes down before he has time to kick in this screen, too. The announcement of the impending pregnancy takes over the burden of comedy relief for the final curtain.

Taking the material as offered, Moss Hart has directed a suitable performance—swift, taut and noisy. And the actors play in the broad farce style of this old-fashioned type of theatre. Kitty Carlisle, looking very beautiful, and Macdonald Carey, looking suitably handsome, give expert performances as the idyllic couple. Phyllis Povah and Howard Smith play the parents-in-law with the ludicrous heartiness the occasion warrants.

Jean Carson, as a quadruple divorcée, rich and blondish; Andrew Duggan, as a jeering man of the world; Pauline Myers, as the utility, comic maid servant who opens the proceedings, and Warren Berlinger and Mary Lee Dearring as precocious adolescents give satisfactory performances. To provide the proper housing for this antic, Frederick Fox has designed a gleaming apartment living room that is spectacular and equipped with the standard fireplace.

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At the moment Mr. Chodorov and Mr. Fields are represented by three Broadway works—"Wonderful Town," for which they wrote the libretto, "The Girl in Pink Tights," ditto, and "Anniversary Waltz," also ditto. The decline in literary skill is notable. In "Anniversary Waltz" they have practically ceased to be writers. They are mechanics. They do not bother to write lines.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

April 8, 1954

'Anniversary Waltz' Dances Into Town

By WILLIAM HAWKINS,

"Anniversary Waltz" knows how to be ecstatically funny and warmly human. Anybody between 13 and 70 will find some intimate association with this tale of rough domestic seas.

The new attraction at the Broadhurst might be subtitled "Life With Father" with a progressive education. Here again an attractive mother and father are bringing up a family and ironing out their own rumpled devotion.

Precocious Children.

This time the children are alarmingly precocious. And there is a generation of grandparents to find the middle-aged group unnecessarily advanced in its ways.

The springboard situation of "Anniversary Waltz" sounds startling. It turns out to be outrageously funny. On their 15th anniversary, a happy husband makes one wine-inspired mistake. He announces to his in-laws the romancing he and their daughter enjoyed before they were legally bound.

The information is received with violent results, by outraged grandparents and blase children.

Hates Television.

The young father complains that family life ends romance. He hates television, as he does domestic turmoil. His friends and relations are intent on giving them TV sets, even faster than he can decommission them. Familiar commercial jingles draw delighted laughs.

The payoff comes at the hilarious second-act curtain. The 13-year-old daughter chooses to tell an air audience of several dozen million people, just what started all the trouble at home.

Finally all generations level off for a new lease on their communal life. Nothing is going to change, except that maybe everybody's temper will be older and calmer.

Shockingly Funny.

The play dips frequently from its top humor. Sometimes the lines seem more abusive than witty. But these faults are realistic enough to apply to most people's lives. The important things about "Anniversary Waltz" are that its best laugh lines are shockingly funny, and that everyone who sees it will get the added kick of thinking he is roaring at his own family or friends.

The co-stars, Macdonald Carey and Kitty Carlisle are fine choices for the harassed mates. The former looks like someone you know, as he bursts with frustrated temper. Miss Carlisle is sleekly lovely in this first non-musical role. She is just bombastic enough in a modern and ladylike way to keep the family affair ringing.

Hair Stands Up.

The wife's parents are played with fine quarrelsome abandon by Phyllis Povah and Howard Smith. And Warren Berlinger and Mary Lee Dearring portray the teenagers with such realistic contempt for Victorian propriety, they make your hair stand on end.

The comedy has been racily directed by Miss Carlisle's husband, Moss Hart. The authors add another hit to their current musical roster of "Wonderful Town" and "Girl in Pink Tights."

New York Post

April 8, 1954

By Richard Watts Jr.

A Comedy About an Anniversary

In the first act of "Anniversary Waltz," the comedy which opened last night at the Broadhurst Theater, an irate and somewhat alcoholic husband kicks in a new television set. In the second act, another set is brought in, and any first-nighter who was astonished when the husband proceeded to demolish it in the same fashion must have recently dropped in from Mars. Indeed, the only surprise of the evening arrives when a third set is dutifully carried onstage in the last act and, with considerable restraint, it is still unbattered at the time of the final curtain.

I bring up the matter because it seems to me that it expresses one of the things wrong with the new play by Jerome Chodorov and Joseph Fields. It has its share of entertaining situations and amusing lines, although they are considerably less witty and original than the dialogue written for last week's "King of Hearts." But, somehow, it all appears mechanical and labored and rather disjointed, and it manages to be interesting only in somewhat heavy-handed fits and starts. I doubt, too, if its characters are as likeable as they are supposed to be.

For their central situation, the authors have shown us a handsome and happy couple who are celebrating their fifteenth wedding anniversary in the company of their two children and the wife's garrulous mother and father. Champagne, whisky and brandy flow, and, in the resulting gaiety, the television-hating husband lets out the fact that it is really the sixteenth anniversary because he and his wife had been living together for a year before their marriage. From then on, the playwrights seem to have improvised their farcial situations as they went along.

The theater, which has always enjoyed mocking upstart new entertainment mediums, has clearly proclaimed an open season on television, and the play's gibes at commercials, old movies, panel shows and other manifestations of its showmanship are vigorous and occasionally comic. Certainly, the husband is at his most sympathetic when he is pretending to appreciate it all and is revealing himself as very long-suffering. But almost always I was under the impression that the plot complications were taking place only because the authors had to fill out three acts.

Then, too, there is the matter of those children. They are intended to be very advanced, precocious and modern, but basically lovable and winning. I suppose they are convincingly advanced, precocious and modern, but they are also as unattractive and unlikeable a young pair as the recent theater or any of the comic strips about children have managed to create. As for the younger married couple and the wife's battling but loving parents, I kept feeling they would be better off if they stayed mad and didn't get together again at the end.

As usual, the play's weaknesses are not chargeable to either the staging or most of the acting. Moss Hart has directed inventively, and such good performers as Kitty Carlisle, Macdonald Carey, Howard Smith and Phyllis Povah, who play the parents and grandparents of the child monsters, offer characteristically skillful performances. There is quite a lot to laugh over in "Anniversary Waltz," but it seems to me nevertheless an unsatisfactory comedy because it is machine-made rather than genuine and likeable.

New York Herald Tribune

April 8, 1954

THEATER

'Anniversary Waltz'

By WALTER F. KERR

ANYONE who has ever wanted to kick in a television set is bound to get a certain vicarious pleasure out of "Anniversary Waltz." As the new comedy at the Broadhurst nears its first-act curtain, an infuriated Macdonald Carey approaches the household monster grimly, trembles just a bit before performing the mighty deed, and then shoves his foot squarely into the gleaming screen. (By way of incidental information, a television set being kicked in makes a lovely, dying noise). Toward the end of the second act, Mr. Carey is making menacing eyes at still another machine. Any further detailing of Mr. Carey's explosive home life would, however, hardly be cricket.

Not that television is the principal devil in the Walters household. Loquaciousness is. The Walters, who live in a cheerful yellow-and-gray New York apartment, are celebrating their fifteenth wedding anniversary. Things are fine with them. The in-laws are on hand with a supply of champagne, the two teen-age children are dressed and scrubbed for the occasion. And Alice and Bud Walters are still in love with one another ("We shouldn't be," sighs Alice, "it's not normal.")

As the party progresses toward a sort of high-spirited candor, Bud Walters feels an irresistible urge to spill a small romantic secret: this may be their fifteenth anniversary but it's really the sixteenth year they've been all in all to one another. The news upsets the older folks quite a bit, but things quickly show signs of quieting down, and the couple themselves are prepared to survive Bud's indiscretion.

This is reckoning without the kids. The kids aren't distressed, they're distinctly interested. In no time at all—or, rather, in a fair amount of time as theater time goes—the youngsters are advising their elders on "premarital relationships," digging into the probable Freudian causes of papa's desire to reveal all ("I've got a houseful of road-company psychiatrists," moans father); and, to top matters off, taking the family secrets onto a soul-probing television panel.

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The detonations which are set off at the Broadhurst benefit enormously from the canny and confident craftsmanship of a good half dozen people. Director Moss Hart has paced and polished the show with trigger-point skill. Kitty Carlisle, hitherto confined to singing roles, proves a warm and adroit comedienne. She is, furthermore, as stunning as her pop-eyed son tells her she is in an unusual juvenile confidence. Macdonald Carey is expansively genial in alcoholic mood, and vigorously frenzied once the children get at him; he is especially funny as he turns over a new fatherly leaf and bestows a hollow, synthetic charity on all about him. Phyllis Povah, Howard Smith and Jean Carson brighten lesser roles, and Frederick Fox's handsomely curved living-room is a smart and shining background for the energetic goings-on.

And authors Jerome Chodorov and Joseph Fields do, over the long haul, come up with a reasonable number of laughs. If "Anniversary Waltz," for all its theatrical virtues, never quite seems brimming over with an interior good humor, it may be because two of its root inspirations are in themselves mildly unattractive.

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Macdonald Carey glosses smoothly over the business of dropping his gratuitous domestic bombshell; but there's a bit of a chill on the situation none the less. And though the children are beamingly played by Warren Berlinger and Mary Lee Dearring, they're still a couple of children you wouldn't want to be left in a Manhattan apartment with. Precocity is, in this instance, both a little trying and a little forced.

As a result, a somewhat calculated atmosphere hovers over the play. Because the initial inspirations aren't entirely winning, everything that follows becomes a kind of gymnastic exercise in comedy rather than a spontaneous overflowing of the comic spirit itself. The various talents involved have seen to it that the evening is frequently funny. But the heart beneath the shenanigans is just a shade heavy.

DAILY NEWS

April 8, 1954

'Anniversary Waltz' Does ¾ Time

By JOHN CHAPMAN

Jerome Chodorov and Joseph Fields have planned a lightly funny treatise on domestic relations in their new comedy, "Anniversary Waltz," which opened last evening at the Broadhurst Theatre. It is most amiably acted by Kitty Carlisle, Macdonald Carey and their fellow players, and in it there is much good, sound laughter. It is a pleasant addition to the Springtime Broadway playbill.

Even so, I think the authors tried to cover too much ground in dealing with the marriage problem, the in-laws problem, the child psychology problem and the television problem. "Anniversary Waltz" might be faster and funnier if there were less in it. But even now the play is fast and funny enough to have given its first audience a pleasant evening. Chodorov and Fields are old hands in the laugh business; they can point a barb or aim a broadside with equal skill.

Everything Perfect?

The story is about the fifteenth wedding anniversary of Miss Carlisle and Mr. Carey. Their domestic bliss seems to be so perfect that it makes Jean Carson, a four-time loser in the Las Vegas divorce mill want to cry. This celebratory couple has everything—love, a boy, a girl, a home and a maid; and the wife has her fond and foolish parents, Phyllis Povah and Howard Smith.

Even so, this anniversary is no idyll. Husband Carey hates television so much that he kicks the tubes out of two gift sets. He is inclined to yell at anybody. The children are much too intelligent for their age and too normal for comfort. The in-laws are addlepates.

An Amiable Cast.

Life, this married pair decide, has crowded in upon them. After one big quarrel they make up and slip away to a hotel for a stolen honeymoon, using a battered bag containing their son's ice skates for identification. Soon there comes another row, and so on.

Carey is charming and funny as the husband who boils quickly and cools fast—the typical spouse who is all contrition after he has done a bad thing. Miss Carlisle is sleek, attractive and full of subtle humor as the long-suffering wife. Miss Povah and Mr. Smith, being good comedians, make an amusing pair of in-laws, and last evening I admired Smith's guts and resourcefulness as he maintained his role in spite of an agonizing case of laryngitis.

There are two more amusing performances by Mary Lea Dearring and Warren Berlinger as the early-teens children, and the authors have written good roles for them. The characters of Miss Carson, the habitual divorcee, and Andrew Duggan, her admirer, are more or less extraneous to the plot, but they are nicely played. There is an attractive set by Frederick Fox, and Moss Hart has directed "Anniversary Waltz" with proper relish for the laughter it contains. Beginning tonight, however, he should step the pace up a bit.

"King of Hearts"

New York Post

April 2, 1954

By Richard Watts Jr.

Comedy Concerning a Cartoonist

"King of Hearts" contains some of the funniest and wittiest dialogue that has been heard in the local theater for a long time. Nor is its display of the comic spirit only to be found in brief snatches. The new play by Jean Kerr and Eleanor Brooke is almost constantly filled with a flow of rapidly-paced talk that is at the same time hilarious, pointed, biting and original. I doubt if there can be any dispute that this sardonic tale of the come-uppance of a selfish comic-strip artist represents contemporary stage humor at a high peak of invention.

Why is it, therefore, that the comedy which opened last night at the Lyceum Theater is, for all of its laughter, brightness and shrewd sardonic observation, basically a disappointment? Isn't it virtually the height of critical ingratitude to accept its unusual combination of wit, humor and intelligence and still complain that the play possessing such merits is nonetheless dissatisfying? In large part, the trouble, I think, is that such skill in the sheer setting down of comic dialogue leads one to expect so much in the way of equally effective narrative.

On Getting Started

At least, while I was enjoying the cascade of the play's high spirits, I found myself expecting and hoping that the play, itself, would get started. And it seemed to me last evening that only upon rare occasions did the narrative that its authors have devised for it keep up with their gift for comic speech. It has not only humorous dialogue but a humorous point of view, and yet it always seemed to me to be hovering at the starting point, crouched down tensely for a sprinter's start and never actually moving into action.

Since "King of Hearts" has as its central figure the arrogant and egoistic creator of one of these popular syndicated narrative strips, who takes himself and his inventions with pompous seriousness, it is natural that the first-nighters were busily trying to figure out the actual identity of its villain. I am unable to help in the matter. From what little I know of these successful and sometimes brilliant gentlemen, I would say it might be any of them save Walt Kelly. Anyway, the playwrights pillory him with agreeable mercilessness.

The Revolt

To arrange for the proper punishment of their victim, the authors have given him a worshipful and long-suffering fiancee, a shy but scornful and rebellious assistant and an adopted child, who is presumably the symbol of his generosity but actually the final proof of his selfishness. Not unexpectedly, all of them turn on the disagreeable fellow in the last act. It is not to the discredit of the play that you are constantly aware this is going to happen. Its weakness is that their revolt is so diffusely and ramblingly presented.

The new play has been expertly and inventively staged by Walter F. Kerr, the fearless drama critic, and it is well acted throughout. Donald Cook brings his customary comic skill to the role of the cartoonist, Jackie Cooper plays the meek assistant with charm and persuasion, and Cloris Leachman is forthright and attractive as the girl. There is a particularly telling and expert performance by David Lewis in the small role of a syndicate manager, and Rex Thompson, a talented child actor, is the boy. "King of Hearts" is so witty a play that it makes me feel like a monster to say that it failed to satisfy me.

"KING OF HEARTS"

Comedy by Jean Kerr and Eleanor Brooke; staged by Walter F. Kerr; scenery and lighting by Frederick Fox; presented by Elaine Perry at the Lyceum Theatre, April 1, 1954. The cast:

Dunreath Henry..Cloris Leachman
Larry Larkin.....Donald Cook
Jeniella.....Hilda Haynes
Mike.....John Drew Devereaux
Francis X. Dignan..Jackie Cooper
Joe Wickes.....David Lewis
Norman Taylor....Rex Thompson
Mr. Hobart.....Carl Low
Billy.....Darryl Richard
Happy.....Peggy
Policeman.....William Sharon

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

April 2, 1954

Every Trick Goes To 'King of Hearts'

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

The curtain came down with a whoop and a holler on "King of Hearts" at the Lyceum last night. This was a tribute to the stamina of the audience. It had been laughing fit to kill since the play began.

Jean Kerr is a real wit. With Eleanor Brooke she has fashioned a biting satire about success. It is aimed specifically at a humorless monster who draws cartoons for a living. The play's laughs rise and fall with the smooth, ceaseless grace of a yoyo.

The story tells us how a head swells up.

The cartoonist is played with cruel brilliance by Donald Cook. He has hoodwinked his secretary into believing he is a genius. She is about to marry him. Then a nice, simple, chicken-hearted young man comes along to draw the pictures while they honeymoon.

Downfall Delayed.

This is danger enough. But the downfall comes through a little boy the cartoonist is egotistical enough to adopt. He tries all his high-flown, phony psychology on the youngster. For his egotistical pains, he gets shown up by the little boy's strength of character, for the jerk he is.

The humor of the play is a constant surprise. Mrs. Kerr has a breezy disdain for pomposity. She is fond of playing a reverse on platitudes. The young man feels "stark, staring sane." He inquires about "the exact butterfat content" of his new boss. The latter is so versatile he may have a group photo made of himself.

The authors cannot resist a laugh. But the humor is in character. Only once do you feel a gag betray the speaker's temperament.

Dramatic Interlude.

Jokes pop like Roman candles. You are just about past laughing again. Suddenly the play levels off into a bitter scene between the cartoonist and the child. The man is hopelessly unable to manage the boy. He tells him some ugly facts about his mother.

Here it looks as if the play can never get back on its first gay track. But the sober interlude gives it momentum. By the end vengeance is done. Everybody comes clean and looks happy. Even the villain is ignoring his lost love to pick at his ego a little.

Jackie Cooper does a splendid job as the substitute artist. Anger makes him nauseous, and he must end up howling insults while flat on his back. Between the sure direction of critic Walter Kerr and Cooper's sharp acting, this character ladles out as many gags as anybody, without once sounding fake or dishonest.

Cloris Leachman, as the lady in question, has fewer outright jokes. She gets her laughs with dainty behavior, as trophy of the tussle. Young Rex Thompson is grand as the mature youngster. He scores high with the only serious dramatic scene in the play. David Lewis gets a stream of sly guffaws as the dry-tongued publisher.

With this "King of Hearts," the Kerrs and their friends take a trick, game and rubber.

The New York Times

April 2, 1954

Theatre: 'King of Hearts' Opens at Lyceum

Jackie Cooper, Donald Cook are Co-Stars

By BROOKS ATKINSON

FORTUNATELY, the authors of "King of Hearts," which opened at the Lyceum last evening, have a sense of humor and the gift of gab. The authors are Jean Kerr, the economy-size wife of The Herald Tribune's drama critic, and Eleanor Brooke, formerly a student in a class he once gave in playwriting. Taking a little time off from demolishing other people's dramas, Mr. Kerr has attended to the direction.

Since Mrs. Brooke's does not spend every night on Broadway, her sense of humor is not so intimately known throughout this closely knit community. But Mrs. Kerr is one of the most fabulous conversationalists on record. She has not made a simple statement of fact since she was a child.

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No one needs to guess where large gobs of the dialogue in "King of Hearts" come from. They sound like Mrs. Kerr making her way sardonically around reality—jeering at the phonies and ridiculing clichés. It is a form of fantasy adjusted to a disillusioned world. Now and then "King of Hearts" takes a sober accounting of the story it is telling. But most of it is wry, fresh and funny.

That is fortunate. For the story of "King of Hearts" takes quite a lot of prodding. It has to do with a megalomaniacal comic strip artist who drives everyone else crazy. His secretary is in love with him and expects to marry him in the beginning. She has succumbed to his purple prose and fatuous eloquence.

But a young artist who assists him first begins to disillusion her. His inhuman superiority toward an adopted son awakens her entirely. After the fashion of popular comedies, everyone wins in the last scene of general accounting. The good people walk out together. The artist is left with his delusions of grandeur.

Egotists make heavy company in and out of the theatre, and the artist in "King of Hearts" is no exception. He is played by Donald Cook with the crisp, dapper, almost farcical style that he has perfected through many amusing seasons.

Everyone else has a more ingratiating part than he has. Under Mr. Kerr's lively direction, they all gave good accounts of themselves. Jackie Cooper is particularly funny as the artist's assistant. As the secretary, Cloris Leachman looks more beautiful than ever and acts with more suppleness and variety.

David Lewis as a worldly employer with a humorous sense of the helpless, and little Rex Thompson as the adopted child with a sense of panic about the past give good performances also.

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In designing an artist's studio, Frederick Fox has come up with a fresh point of view, which may get him in trouble with his profession. There isn't a single fireplace in sight. He has designed a duplex in modern style with a flight of steps that looks airy and a real sense of space and gaiety.

Naturally, no one does any work in such a pleasant environment. Nearly everyone in the cast is gainfully employed, but their life is bedlam and a series of constant interruptions. Seldom have so many people succeeded in never getting anything done in the midst of such a whirlwind.

There are some charming scenes in "King of Hearts" concerning the normal intractability of children. There is a lot of hilarious dialogue. But Mrs. Kerr and Mrs. Brooke have to huff and puff a lot with their story. No matter how wittily they write their lines, it still insists upon resisting them.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune
April 2, 1954

THEATER

'King of Hearts'

Walter F. Kerr, drama critic of the Herald Tribune, gave up his seat on the aisle last night to direct "King of Hearts" and the Herald Tribune asked Hobe Morrison, drama critic of "Variety," the theatrical weekly, to pass judgment on Mr. Kerr's efforts—and those of co-author Jean Kerr, his wife. Mr. Morrison's verdict follows:

By Hobe Morrison

PROBABLY nobody will like "King of Hearts" very much except audiences. The Jean Kerr and Eleanor Brooke comedy, which Elaine Perry brought to the Lyceum Thursday, may not rate as immortal drama, but it keeps the theater bubbling with laughs. It's a very funny show.

Credit the authors with pulling off a difficult assignment. They've written a play about an odious egomaniac and somehow made it not only palatable, but also entertaining and, at the end, actually ingratiating. Most of all, credit every one concerned with turning up a whole evening of funny lines.

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This is a yarn about a highly successful comic strip artist, his meekly smitten secretary-fiancee and the slow-burning ghost artist he employs. If the unprepossessing hero is slightly less villainous than Iago, he's twice as repulsive and much more talkative—all in the first person.

There's something a little suggestive of "Born Yesterday" about the way this long-play bore becomes progressively a conniving hypocrite and finally a sadistic monster, only to be upended and deserted by his seemingly helpless victims. Like the Garson Kanin play, "King of Hearts" has the quiet but clear-eyed young man show up the swaggering bully to his fiancee. Most important, both plays punctuate the process with rib-spraining laughs.

Curiously enough, "King of Hearts" has some touching moments—touching because they are true. There is a wonderfully lifelike urchin, adopted in a moment of grandiloquent, utterly spurious kindliness by the artist, whose grave manner of waging the psychological warfare of children against their exasperating elders is hilariously genuine. There is also a marvelously dignified English sheep dog and a sober-faced comic syndicate executive who contrives to create a rafter-shaker with almost every line.

"King of Hearts" is somewhat slow-starting. Its first scenes are virtually a monologue by the conceited comic artist who fancies himself a cosmic thinker with the human touch. Occasionally through the second act, too, this marathon menace seems about to talk the play off the stage and into Cain's proverbial warehouse. But invariably Mrs. Kerr and Miss Brooke come up with an explosive laugh, and at the finale they arrange everything satisfactorily.

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The play is superbly cast. As the infuriating comic strip artist, Donald Cook is almost frighteningly persuasive. He gives an expertly detestable performance — smooth, dynamic, vigorous, subtle, with only an occasional trace of the bogus Southern accent hangover from his long run in "The Moon Is Blue."

Jackie Cooper is equally convincing in the less complex role of the likable young stand-in artist whose uneasy stomach humiliates him in crises of anger. His is a seemingly effortless performance, straight-faced but with a gleam in the eye, and just the right suggestion of emotion.

As the secretary whose backbone is obscured by gullibility and devotion, Chloris Leachman is properly flexible, with the necessary touch of fire when the occasion arises and the essential trick of playing straight to the laugh lines. Rex Thompson is devastatingly right as the seemingly disinterested moppet with an instinct for the war between the generations. There are also perceptive supporting performances by David Lewis as the patient, sentient syndicate representative, Hilda Haynes as a philosophical maid and Darryl Richard as a young neighbor.

Walter F. Kerr, whose observations normally occupy this space, has demonstrated that he knows what he writes about by providing "King of Hearts" with compact, brisk direction, and Frederick Fox has provided a stunningly modernized studio-living room setting.

"King of Hearts" has its faults, but it has what it takes.

Journal-American
April 2, 1954

Chock Full of Fun

Comedy of Nonsense Heads for Hit Parade

By JOHN McCLAIN

THIS IS an ugly chore facing me, for it involves the efforts of a friend and fellow critic and his ever-loving wife. Walter F. Kerr, who operates the drama guillotine at the Herald Tribune, has chosen to direct a new comedy called "The King Of Hearts," written by his wife, Jean, in collaboration with Eleanor Brooke.

There were times, especially toward the end of the first act, when I thought it was going to be one of the funniest shows ever written.

This would have been regrettable, from a selfish standpoint, for it might have made the Kerrs too fat and rich to continue in the reviewing racket, and I hence would have been robbed of the amiable vista of their heads on opening nights.

There was another interlude, however, notably in the third act, when an even more serious crisis arose. It looked as if the whole thing might wheeze and die, like a ruptured accordion. But it gives me infinite pleasure to report that neither of these calamities came off.

Delirious Lines

What the Kerrs and Miss Brooke have achieved, in my reckoning, is a series of deliriously comic lines and three superb performances suspended in a vacuum.

There is almost no play and very few amusing situations growing out of character, but there are enough laughs that you won't care too much. You'll have a good time and I think the Kerrs have a hit.

The meagre plot on which the authors have built their incredible stockpile of gags and nifties concerns a comic strip artist whose success has parlayed him into an impossible megalomaniac with pretensions as a leader of the youth of the nation.

His attractive secretary has somehow fallen in love with him and they are about to be married when a "ghost" artist arrives to take over some of the cartooning duties while the master is on his honeymoon.

Well, the secretary comes to her senses and falls in love with the "ghost." End of play.

Frantic Finish

That isn't much of a story, but along the way there is a never-ending parade of incidental characters and situations, many of them excruciating. There are two wonderful kids, and a dog (shaggy, at that); there is the comic maid, the bewildered cop and the urbane and witty publisher who drinks constantly.

These elements, stuck together with old bandaids, march quite gleefully down the street until about the middle of the last act, at which point somebody must have decided to stop and look for the plot. This search was rather protracted and unrewarding, but sheer nonsense is finally restored and events rush to a frantic finish.

Almost nobody but Donald Cook could have exerted the enormous authority to pull the proceedings together in the role of the comic artist. And

nobody could come closer to bringing some faint reality to the part of a bright and decorative girl who becomes entranced with this monster than Cloris Leachman.

Jackie Cooper, as the stand-in for the artist, reveals himself as an actor who can hold his own with Cook, Miss Leachman, two kids and a dog — a sincere monument to his ability.

Direction Praised

Now to approach the nerve center I would say that Jean Kerr and Miss Brooke, singly or as a team, could make a whacking living writing jokes. Mrs. Kerr has reported elsewhere that while the show was in Philadelphia she was busy taking laughs OUT of it. I thought it was a somewhat hazardous statement at the time, but now I believe it was valid. There are almost too many bright lines. But while she took the laughs out she might have substituted a little substance.

I have only praise for Walter Kerr's direction. I never can tell where the director leaves off and a guy like Mr. Cook begins, but in this case they got the most out of the lines. I should say he handled Miss Leachman, Mr. Cooper, the kids and the dog with eminent success.

Walter, are we still friends? Speak to me!

Daily Mirror

April 2, 1954

'King of Hearts,' Comedy, Opens at Lyceum

BY ROBERT COLEMAN

Take a romantic triangle with a pretty, young girl, a likable young fellow and an egotistical stuffed shirt as its corners. Add a couple of attractive kids. Bring on a big shaggy dog. Season with a lot of bright dialogue. Well, you ought to have a sure-fire hit. But we're wondering.

JEAN KERR and Eleanor Brooke started with all the ingredients for success. They persuaded their former teacher at Catholic University, Walter F. Kerr, to stage their comedy, called "King of Hearts." It was presented by Elaine Perry, at the Lyceum Theatre last evening, in a smart Frederick Fox setting. But we're still wondering.

The Mrs. Kerr and Brooke have chosen to satirize a comic-strip artist, who takes himself too seriously. He began with a boy and a dog, and parlayed them into a fortune. But he made the mistake of turning the youngster into something of a philosophic prig, a reflection of himself.

Under the pretense of getting inspiration for his work, but really to garner publicity, he adopts an orphan in his fiancee's name. After all, he had heard of another brat who got a judgment against a guardian. Enter an amiable ghost, a well-meaning, capable, and human door-mat, willing to take considerable abuse and suffer anonymity for 250 bucks a week.

BY NOW, you must have suspected what happens in the end. The easy-going worm of a ghost turns on his pompous boss, and ends up with the fiancee, the orphan and the pooch. Naturally, everyone out front was in accord with the Kerr-Brooke solution. For, as Leibnitz argued so ably, virtue must inevitably triumph in this best of all possible worlds.

The Mrs. Kerr and Brooke have been content to settle for a sketchy plot, on which they have draped many sparkling and many hilarious gags and wisecracks. One of our neighbors laughed so hard that we feared she was going to tumble right out of her box into our lap. And we thought a lot of the proceedings downright funny, too.

Cloris Leachman is delightful as the harried secretary-fiancee. Jackie Cooper is ingratiating as the ghost with the nervous stomach who develops a mind of his own. And Donald Cook, a fascinating actor to watch, is excellent in perhaps the most unsympathetic role he has yet essayed.

COOK'S SENSE of timing is one of the best you'll find on a stage today. He knows how to set up, as well as to capitalize on, a laugh. He is as skilled as they come in pacing a play. He's always a handy man to have around, even when he's condemned to be the butt of the humor.

Master Rex Thompson, who was so captivating in "Escapade," has been coached to shriek continuously through the role of the real-boy orphan. He is permitted few nuances, but does everything required of him with credit. And we liked Master Darryl Richard as his less robust pal.

David Lewis is an asset as a sane and shrewd syndicate mogul. You can always count on him for a solid performance. Carl Low does well by a baffled magazine interviewer. And pet lovers should enjoy Patchwork Peggy, as Happy, the huge dog of mixed ancestry.

Well, we've been wondering. But now we must say, regretfully, that "King of Hearts" is a case of almost but not quite.

WINCHELL SAYS:

"You've gotta buy it! It's a laff riot!"

DAILY NEWS

April 2, 1954

Bright Remarks in 'King of Hearts,' Comedy About a Comic-Stripper

By JOHN CHAPMAN

The audience and I spent a good deal of our time laughing last evening at the lines and the actors in "King of Hearts," which opened at the Lyceum Theatre. This comedy, by Jean Kerr and Eleanor Brooke, is at its best when the authors have written a good smart joke and one or more of the excellent actors are involved in delivering the joke. The comedy itself, however, is not exactly convincing; it seems to be a cartoon when it was meant as a caricature.

Mmes. Kerr and Brooke tell the story of a comic-strip artist who has deluded himself into believing that he has Social Significance—and here, surely, is a great field for the literary caricaturist, because so many of today's and yesterday's comic-strippers fancy themselves as elderly Western Union boys delivering messages.

This fellow in the play—who is acted cleanly and sharply by Donald Cook—is a syndicated genius who is making the mistake of losing his child audience. Indeed, before the play ends, he discovers that the only audience he has is himself. Here is an excellent setup for a penetrating comedy, but the play itself gets lost in a rather uninteresting and unbelievable love story.

An Arbitrary Plot.

The cartoonist, a complete egotist, has decided he will marry his new secretary and take a honeymoon cruise. In order to get away for the cruise, he must hire a ghost cartoonist to carry on his strip about a boy while he is away. The ghost cartoonist, a mild fellow as all ghosts are, falls in love with the secretary.

There is another quite arbitrary complication. The cartoonist and the secretary, without benefit of wedlock, adopt a small boy—a perfectly normal small boy who doesn't have an ounce of Social Significance in him.

Many Bright Lines.

The lines of "King of Hearts" are bright and literate. It is very funny when cartoonist Cook says he has finished drawing his poster for the safety campaign with its slogan, "The child you hit might have been President." It is cheerful when one or another of the actors declares, "I'm a simon pure Legree" or "I feel stark, staring sane."

And the play is interesting when Rex Thompson, the small, normal boy, is on the stage. This lad is quite an actor. It is interesting when Jackie Cooper, as the ghost cartoonist, slowly works up his indignation at the sad lot of being a ghost and being in love with the boss' girl. Cloris Leachman, as the girl, is an attractive and serious young comedienne, and David Lewis contributes a dry and salty performance as a newspaper syndicate editor.

"King of Hearts" has been directed by Walter F. Kerr, drama critic of the Herald Tribune, and co-author Jean Kerr is his wife. I'd say their collaboration has been industrious, intelligent and good-humored, and that the play is more pleasant than it is exciting.

"The Golden Apple"

Daily Mirror

March 12, 1954

'Golden Apple' Is Gay, Magnificent Musical

By ROBERT COLEMAN

T. Edward Hambleton and Norris Houghton stood Manhattan on its ear Thursday evening with their presentation of "The Golden Apple" at the Phoenix Theatre. A smart first-night audience rocked the rafters with robust applause for the new John Latouche and Jerome Moross musical.

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"THE GOLDEN APPLE" might be described as a folk opera, a musical satire or what you please. Anyway, it's a magnificent achievement. A sensational success. Quite the most original and imaginative work of its kind to blaze across the theatrical horizon in many a moon.

Latouche has chosen to spoof Homer's "Iliad" and "Odyssey." The locale is the township of Angel's Roost and the city of Rhododendron in the state of Washington shortly after the Spanish-American War. Helen is the wife of the town's elderly big shot, Menelaus. She is lured away in a balloon by Mr. Paris, a glib traveling salesman.

Ulysses, a young war veteran, is talked into leaving his pretty wife, Penelope, and leading an expedition to rescue the errant Helen. He does so by besting Paris in a boxing match. Then he lingers to enjoy the fleshpots of the big city. He encounters Madam Calypso at a celebratory ball, Scylla and Charybdis in a brokerage office, a Siren in a waterfront dive and Circe on the wrong side of the tracks.

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EVENTUALLY the wanderer, wiser, poorer and older, returns to the patient Penelope in pastoral Angel's Roost. A lyrical ending to adventures that are variously fascinating, exciting and downright hilarious.

All this is told via song, dance and pantomime. There are no spoken lines to hinder the action, which amazingly, is always lucid and entertaining. It is a superlative feat of craftsmanship by librettist-lyricist Latouche and composer Moross. Somewhat in the spirit of "Ballet Ballads," it is a more ambitious, skillful and arresting work.

Norman Lloyd has directed with resource and taste, and Hanya Holm has contributed most helpful and enjoyable choreography. William and Jean Eckart have designed charming settings and Alvin Colt giddy and gorgeous costumes. Moross and Hershey Kay have made orchestrations that display the music to excellent advantage.

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KAYE BALLARD, a Spike Jones band and nitery alumna, is captivating as the wayward Helen. To give you an idea of her comic genius, she covered a slight mishap in the orchestra pit (the conductor's score fell from the podium) with an engaging joust with a fan. The audience loved it, and we suspect the bit will be retained at future performances. It should.

Jack Whiting, the veteran show-stopper, is up to his old tricks again as a suave city slicker. His ingratiating style, his irresistible personality and his smooth soft-shoeing are among the highlights. Stephen Douglass, manly and full-voiced, is outstanding as Ulysses, and Priscilla Gillette pretty and warming as Penelope.

Salutes are also due Jonathan Lucas, Bibi Osterwald, Portia Nelson, Geraldine Viti, Nola Day and Dean Michener. In fact, a bow from the waist should go to the entire cast.

"The Golden Apple" is the kind of musical that might be impossible to do in the commercial theatre. Hambleton and Houghton are to be commended for having the courage to produce it. It is art, without being arty. For an evening of sheer delight, we urge you to visit the Phoenix.

"THE GOLDEN APPLE"

Musical with book and lyrics by John Latouche; music by Jerome Moross; staged by Norman Lloyd; musical director, Hugh Ross; settings by William and Jean Eckart; costumes by Alvin Colt; presented by T. Edward Hambleton and Norris Houghton at the Phoenix Theatre, March 11, 1954. The cast:

Helen.....Kaye Ballard
Lovely Mars.....Bibi Osterwald
Mrs. Juniper.....Geraldine Viti
Miss Minerva Oliver.....Portia Nelson
Mother Hare.....Nola Day
Penelope.....Priscilla Gillette
Menelaus.....Dean Michener
Captain Mars.....Frank Scabolt
Ajax.....Marten Sameth
Agamemnon.....Crandall Diehl
Nestor.....Maurice Edwards
Bluey.....Murray Gitlin
Thirsty.....Don Redlich
Silas.....Peter De Malo
Homer.....Barton Maumaw
Diomede.....Robert Flavelle
Achilles.....Julian Patrick
Patroclus.....Larry Chelsi
Doc MacCahan.....Gary Gordon
Ulysses.....Stephen Douglass
Theron.....David Hooks
Mayor Juniper.....Jerry Stiller
Paris.....Jonathan Lucas
Hector Charybdis...Jack Whiting

New York Post

March 12, 1954

By Richard Watts Jr.

Season's Best New Musical Show

In the third presentation of its season, the remarkable Phoenix Theater has not only lived up to its admirable record but improved upon it. To follow "Madam, Will You Walk" and "Coriolanus," the enterprising downtown organization last night offered a musical play by John Latouche and Jerome Moross called "The Golden Apple," and it is certainly no exaggeration to describe it as the best new musical comedy of the season. It is even an understatement. "The Golden Apple" is a thorough delight in its freshness, imagination, charm and brightness.

After the fashion of their excellent "Ballet Ballads" of a few years ago, Mr. Latouche and Mr. Moross have told their story entirely in song and dance. It is a play in music, rather than a play with music. And, happily, both men have been equally successful in their contributions. The Latouche lyrics are not only gay, satirical, intelligent and versatile, but also carry on the narrative with theatrical effectiveness. The Moross music has the same admirable virtues, and the result is a splendidly integrated show that possesses an authentic style.

If I seem to delay telling what "The Golden Apple" is about, it is not because I lack any enthusiasm for the story. It is merely that I'm afraid I may make it sound pretentious, which it assuredly isn't. For what the authors have done is take the Greek legends of Helen, Paris, Menelaus, Ulysses and Penelope, transfer them to America at the beginning of the century, and give them the homely humor of a folk tale. Such things can be either pompous and dreary or embarrassingly schoolgirlish if they are not managed with deftness, skill and tact.

Indeed, when you note in the program characters called "Lovey Mars," "Mrs. Minerva Oliver" and "Hector Charybdis," you may have a moment of fearing the worst. But there is no reason for worry, because the authors, the producers and the cast have everything in hand. There is nothing at all precious about "The Golden Apple." There is taste in the Latouche-Moross work, as well as an almost constant stream of good humorous invention and a high pictorial skill, and the music, the lyrics and the dances have just the lightness and freshness of touch that is needed.

For all the excellence in the writing and composing, "The Golden Apple" might still have its difficulties if the other elements that have gone into it were not skillfully managed. Fortunately, the production is a happy one. Hanya Holm has fitted the dances into the narrative with just the proper style. The settings by William and Jean Eckart and the costumes by Alvin Colt bring the proper combination of beauty, humor and imagination into the pattern of the show with equal success, and there is no jarring note in the perfect coordination of the evening.

It was also important that the cast should consist of good actors who can sing so that the lyrics may be heard. Under Norman Lloyd's able direction, everyone strikes the right mood, and I am probably omitting some of them when I express particular admiration for Stephen Douglass as Ulysses, Priscilla Gillette as Penelope, Kaye Ballard as Helen, Jonathan Lucas as the dancing Paris, Bibi Osterwald as an island siren, Portia Nelson as a scientist, Nola Day as a seeress, and, especially, Jack Whiting as a city slicker. Did I say I liked "The Golden Apple"?

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

March 12, 1954

Phoenix Takes Bow For 'Golden Apple'

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

For invention and freshness and beauty and impudence there is hardly a show on Broadway that can touch "The Golden Apple."

The new musical at the Phoenix is a dreamy descendant of the "Ballet Ballads" of a few seasons ago. John Latouche has pretended that the story of Helen, Paris, Ulysses and all their friends happened on an American farm right after the Spanish-American War.

The result is naughty, colorful and funny. The performers are young and fresh and eager. A number come from nightclub backgrounds. Jerome Moross has given them tingly tunes for the impertinent lyrics.

Hanya Holm is a real star of the proceedings. If there was ever a slow moment, it is one when everybody went solemn for a line or two, and forgot how vital Miss Holm's inspired dance direction is to the spirit of the show.

Sets Exciting.

Just as exciting are the imaginative sets of William and Jean Eckart, and the insane costumes of Alvin Colt. The backgrounds appear from the sky, or get pushed onstage by passing actors. Often they are transparent but they are always bright.

We point out these credits first, because these are the people who made it possible for the cast to look so fine.

Priscilla Gillette and Stephen Douglass get first billing as the conventional leads, Penelope and Ulysses. Perhaps it is the nobility of the roles they fill so efficiently that makes them sparkle less than their fellows.

Kaye Ballard for instance is a joy as Helen. She can say worlds with a slow and lecherous grin, and times her songs with a daffy attitude all her own. "Lazy Afternoon," which she sings to Paris, is a wonder of insinuation.

Witty Gyrations.

Paris is a fetching lad as danced by Jonathan Lucas. He is a traveling salesman who arrives by balloon, and steps his way into the hearts of the local girls without uttering a word. The gyrations Miss Holm has invented for him are spruce and witty.

Just in case the applause goes to the heads of the younger gang, Jack Whiting steps out and stops the show with a casual soft shoe and a winning lyric.

The other girls get their big pitch when Ulysses' boys go hog wild in the big town. Geraldine Viti is a florid widow whose oily fortune lures the farmers, and Portia Nelson turns in a sprightly comic performance as an inventor of diabolical machines.

Parody on Dances.

Perhaps the show's funniest item is led by Bibi Osterwald in a wicked parody of all the Hawaiian songs ever danced or sung. It is nonsense but so rudely danced and so luringly sung that it assigns the hula imitators to a back seat from now on.

For the Phoenix "The Golden Apple" is an out and out triumph. It should jam the place as long as it stays. The show has minor slumps and some distracting balances between voice and orchestra. Nobody can mind on 12th St., but if the show ever bids for Broadway competition, it could stand a little ironing here and there. Meanwhile, Bravo.

DAILY NEWS

March 12, 1954

A Completely Delightful Musical, 'The Golden Apple' Is Real Gold

By JOHN CHAPMAN

Way off the Broadway track at Second Ave. and 12th St. the Phoenix Theatre opened a production called "The Golden Apple" last evening. It is an off-beat, off-rhyme, off-harmony musical which lifts our Broadway song-and-dance theatre right off the comfortable seat of its pants and then gives it a kick in said pants. "The Golden Apple" is the best thing that has happened in and to the theatre in a very long time. Every part of it—music, lyrics, staging, scenery, costumes and company—is refreshing, tangy, delightful and intelligent.

This one is really a musical, for in it there is no spoken dialog; everything is sung. The book and lyrics are the work of John Latouche; the music is by Jerome Moross, and the orchestration is by Moross and Hershey Kay. The humor is by everybody.

Homer Smites Again.

"The Golden Apple" is a free-hand estimate of what Homer would have sung about in the Apple State of Washington in the early 1900s if Ulysses, Penelope, Helen of Troy and Paris had been up there in the mountains instead of fooling around the fringes of the Aegean Sea a long time B. C. Our hero is an apple-farmer named Ulysses and his wife, Penelope, gets tired of his loping off on such adventures as the Spanish-American war and dallying in a sinful hot spot with a gal named Circe.

With the Homeric legends as a framework for a parable, Latouche has built a wry and funny story about the present human race. "The Golden Apple" is a witty, satirical parade of human foibles and fallacies, as sharply pointed as a topical revue of yesteryear. The Moross music is equally adroit and artful. It never lets the listener settle down, but keeps him alert for the next unexpected turn of phrase or tone or rhythm.

There are songs in an almost-ordinary sense, and I think one that is headed for immediate popularity is a number sung by Kaye Ballard called "Lazy Afternoon." It is sultry, saucy and seductive in every word and intonation, and Miss Ballard sings it with wonderful style.

Everybody's Outstanding.

A number of singers and dancers, indeed perform with wonderful style. There is Jack Whiting, as a modern Hector, singing a charming but cynical number about the various weaknesses of our race. There is Bibi Osterwald intoning a marvelous spoof on "Bali H'ai," "By Goona-Goona Lagoon." There is Portia Nelson as a super-modern scientist, predicting the doom of our race and admitting we were a biological mistake anyway. There is Priscilla Gillette, singing the softer melodies of the lonesome and lovely Penelope. There is Stephen Douglass, singing lovingly to his Penelope or boastfully about his first store-bought suit.

On the dancing side there are many pleasant and impish conceits devised by Hanya Holm, and some excellent work by Jonathan Lucas in the role of a smart-alec traveling salesman named Paris. Much of the success of "The Golden Apple" can be credited to its two directors, Norman Lloyd and Miss Holm. With free hands and light hearts they have put together a stylish and zestful musical escapade. And the Alvin Colt costumes and the settings by William and Jean Eckart are all a part of a remarkably attractive theatrical adventure.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune
March 12, 1954

THEATER

'The Golden Apple'

By Virgil Thomson

Some of It Fun

"THE GOLDEN APPLE," which opened Thursday at the Phoenix Theater, is composed entirely in rhymed verse and set to music throughout. No prose and no speech mar (or relieve) its consistency. The verses by John Latouche are vivacious, sparkling, ingenious and at many moments very, very funny. The music by Jerome Moross, though deliciously orchestrated (by himself), your reviewer found less entertaining. Based alternately on rumba rhythms, ragtime formulas and the Appalachian ballad style (modal and minor), it aimed to evoke, I presume, something nostalgic for all ages of customer. But melodically it did not, for this customer, leave the ground. And this customer is one who cherishes in the theater tunes that soar above the mechanics of good background music.

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The story is "The Iliad" of Homer, no less, set in the State of Washington apple country about fifty years ago. Ulysses and Penelope, Paris and Helen, Hector and Patroclus, Calypso and Circe, are all there, manoeuvred about choreographically by the fine hand of Hanya Holm under the general direction (no less expert) of Norman Lloyd, dancing like mad and singing bawdy songs in Mae West costumes. If the Homeric parallel seemed a bit heavy (and to this one it did) and the music insistently on the jiggy side (he longed for some three-four time), the words of the show and its visual presentation were ever lively, imaginative and fresh.

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The scenery by William and Jean Eckart is tastily drawn, out of the ordinary in its prettiness of color and fanciful in its clever, almost Japanese simplicity. The costumes by Alvin Colt are pretty too and vivid in color. Miss Holm's dance design is nothing short of brilliant, especially when it is comic. A burlesque of a South Seas number, entitled "By Goona Goona-La Goon" nearly stopped the show last night, as did also, for purely verbal reasons, a patter duet, after Gallager and Shean, between Mr. Charybdis and Mr. Scylla.

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Actually the special numbers, all of them burlesques of standard music-show numbers (at the same time that they take off the Homeric incidents), show Mr. Latouch's hilarious wit and rhyming virtuosity, as well as Miss Holm's high comic powers, at their top. These moments, and the very real freshness of the visual speetacle, are the show's trump cards. Because the story is cumbersome and the music, for all its lightness of hand and delicate variety in the scoring, heavy-spirited. If "The Golden Apple" survives many weeks, it will be because of some neat production gimmicks and its vast exuberance of rhyming and dancing.

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Its casting will not hurt it, either, though there is no star, no room for one. Kaye Ballard, as Helen, and Bibi Osterwald, as Lovey Mars, got the biggest hand for their rasping-voiced vocal style and obvious (but not too corny) sexual innuendo. Stephen Douglass, as Ulysses, sang more or less classically and quite pleasantly. Jack Whiting, as Hector Charybdis, a cane-twirling, frock-coated slicker, hardly sang at all; but he projected his songs perfectly. In general, the less everybody tried to really sing and concentrated on putting over the words, the better the effect. Hugh Ross conducted to perfection.

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"The Golden Apple" is good fun a good deal of the time. It is a little pretentious, but it has gusto in it and wit. And its orchestra makes far lovelier sounds than we are used to hearing in a musical.

Journal-American
March 12, 1954

Great Musical Merits Raves

By JOHN McCLAIN

REGISTER herewith an unqualified rave for "The Golden Apple," the John Latouche-Jerome Moross musical which opened at the Phoenix Theatre last night.

Although singularly unheralded, this is easily the most satisfactory and original song and dance effort of the past several seasons and, in my opinion, can be classed as an American Gilbert and Sullivan. A deep bow to the producers, the authors, the participants.

Here is one of those rare and gratifying experiences in the theatre—with fulfillment of an idea long nurtured and finally brought to bloom.

After years of struggle and disappointment the property finally arrived in the hands of the dedicated few who were apparently preordained to give it life. These are not the big-best names in the theatre today, but they are all inordinately right for "The Golden Apple."

American Illiad

Employing no unsung word of dialogue throughout, the Mssrs. Latouche and Moross have told in song and lyric an American interpretation of the Grecian Illiad and Odyssey.

Ulysses is a soldier home from the Spanish-American War, returning to the arms of his beloved Penelope. Helen is a farmer's daughter, whose roving eye quickly falls upon Paris, the traveling salesman.

Other Olympian figures are easily transposed into the local types inhabiting the town of Angel's Roost, Wash., in the year 1900.

The ensuing action involves Ulysses' convenient quest of Helen, who has taken off for the big city with Paris. For ten years he follows her, becoming more and more seduced by the lure of the flesh-pots, but returning at long last to his wife secure in the knowledge that the most golden apple grows in his own back yard.

To tell this tale Mr. Moross has evolved a flow of continuous music embodying some of the best elements of Stephen Foster, a hunk of early hillbilly, snatches reminiscent of the "You're Only A Girl That Men Forget" school, with interpolated bits from the Bunny Hug jazz era. And, in case you may think he can't be modern, he drops in a Calypso and a Hula number later on.

To accompany all this Mr. Latouche has devised a libretto which tells the story and yet, miraculously, keeps pace with the period and emotional moods of the music.

It is odd, and quite exciting, to realize that a show can thus be so capably sustained entirely through lyrics.

The performances are almost uniformly laudable; Priscilla Gillette is the eternal and decorative symbol of the home, with the voice of a lark; Stephen Douglass is one of the few young men around capable of looking like Ulysses, acting like him, and still managing to sing such a man-eating part with clarity and distinction; Kaye Ballard, a voluptuous Helen, can leer and vocalize at the same moment, and Jack Whiting, the perennial Jimmy Walker, is on hand with top hat and cane to do that same engaging impression of a city slicker.

Equal plaudits can be showered on the rest of the cast, down to and including a young lady listed among the dancers as Tao Strong.

Special merit badges should be awarded William and Jean Eckart for the sets, an ingenious series of drops and backgrounds which are always bright and imaginative.

Similar citations should go to Norman Lloyd, for direction; Hanya Holm, for the choreography, especially the hilarious "Goona-goona Lagoon" number; Hugh Ross for a fabulous job of musical direction (but a little less steam when Miss Gillette is singing), and Alvin Coit for the fresh and flippant costumes.

"The Golden Apple" is some sort of milestone in the American musical theatre. This is a great show.

The New York Times
March 12, 1954

AT THE THEATRE

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Style: rich; material: intricate. That might serve as a general comment on "The Golden Apple," which was acted and sung at the Phoenix last evening. It is a satire written by John Latouche with music by Jerome Moross, and an enchanting production designed by William and Jean Eckart with vivid costumes by Alvin Colt.

Originally the Phoenix was to live in noble penury—always a worthy ideal. Although "The Golden Apple" is not a heavy production, it has been designed in impeccable taste by people who love form and color. The Phoenix may have been penny-plain two or three months ago. It is tuppenced colored now. This is a light, gay, charming production

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"The Golden Apple" is a double satire. It applies the Homeric legend of Helen and Ulysses to a mythical town in the State of Washington from 1900 to 1910. Mr. Latouche has to make wry faces in two directions; and, in the opinion of one playgoer, that is the reason why "The Golden Apple" is more like a faculty joke than a sharp musical satire with an explicit theme. Mr. Latouche wrote with more joyousness and gusto in "Ballad for Americans" and "Ballet Ballads." From both the musical and literary points of view "The Golden Apple" is on the cerebral side.

The musical form may have something to do with an impression that "The Golden Apple" strives after a friskiness that it does not quite achieve. Long sequences of it are recitative, written in a narrow compass and increasingly monotonous to listen to all evening. Mr. Moross has written several lovely or humorous songs; and fortunately, they are well sung by actors with temperament.

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In the part of Helen, Kaye Ballard is particularly funny. For Mr. Latouche's Helen is no classical heroine, but a small-town trollop with a mock-lascivious manner. "Lazy Afternoon," which she sings to the leafy dancing of Jonathan Lucas, is a triumphant number and the high point of the show.

In the part of the dissembling Mars, Bibi Osterwald is breezy too. She has an amusingly leering way with the comic ballad of "The Judgment of Paris." Translated into a tropical hussy in the second act, she burlesques "By Goona-Goona Lagoon" hilariously. Priscilla Gillette's domesticated Penelope is a beautiful fireside woman, Miss Gillette catches the lyrical sweetness of "My Love Is On the Way" and breaks the sly mood of the show with a welcome burst of temper in the last scene.

As the sibyl, Mother Hare, Nola Day gives one of the most professional performances in the cast. She sings her songs of dark prophecy with a lightness of style that catches the exact mood of the satire. Stephen Douglas' Ulysses is an imposing hero with an excellent voice, but a rather literal manner that is none too happy for musical satire. Jack Whiting, who is probably now fated to play comedy mayors for the rest of his career, struts entertainingly through the part of Hector, not bothering much with the music.

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"The Golden Apple" is an ambitious parody of the old legends. According to the program, Mr. Moross has written twenty-seven songs, to say nothing of his share of pleasant orchestrations. Mr. Latouche has written enough lyrics for three ordinary shows. Not all of them are in his most brilliant style. Hanya Holm has found room enough to introduce a few ballets in either the country style that is so winning in our theatre or the broad burlesque of the tropical number. Norman Lloyd has given the production a brisk tempo in his direction.

With all this richness of style running through the production, why should a theatregoer be a little reluctant about the whole work? Perhaps it tries to do too much. The satire gets random and the music gets restless and the point of view diffuse. "The Golden Apple" is the only literate new musical of the season. It has a brilliant surface, but the content is thin.

"The Girl on the Via Flaminia"

"The Girl on the Via Flaminia" opened downtown at the Circle in the Square on February 9, 1954, and moved uptown to the 48th Street Theatre on April 1, 1954. Please note that some of the following reviews are of the original opening and some of the later date.

New York World-Telegram
and
The [illegible] Sun

February 10, 1954

'Flaminia' Looks Like Another Hit

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

That phenomenal organization known as Circle in the Square has come up with what ought to prove another hit in "The Girl on the Via Flaminia."

Previously this group has concentrated mostly on revivals, and exclusively on plays of quite personal import. In this new work the whole current temperament of our international relations is explored, in dramatic and stimulating fashion.

This is a story of a most informal union between an American soldier and an Italian girl, in Rome directly after the liberation. The theme of their association is, "I was lonely, she was hungry."

The play goes on to tell how things between sensitive people are never that simple.

Love Turns to Hate.

The girl feels degraded and turns her hate on the soldier. He tries to keep things fair, but is constantly put on the defensive. They live in the home of a philosophical Italian mother, who sells wine and spaghetti to the occasional lonely soldier. Because she is compassionate enough to find them dates she is involved with the police.

With her, then, is involved the Girl. Since she cannot prove she is a wife she receives a yellow ticket of identification. Now the soldier's concern for her is awakened. He tries to repair the damage he has unwittingly done, but it is too late for the Girl.

The dramatization of the novel is accomplished with spare but significant writing. It is acted with quite remarkable aplomb by this increasingly seasoned company.

Jose Quintero, who went from the Circle to Broadway to direct "In the Summerhouse," returned to take over "The Girl on the Via Flaminia." It is unlikely that anyone in the business understands more about how to keep an arena-style play moving in believable and natural fashion.

Delicate Balance.

In the title role Betty Miller plays in a delicate mood of defiance which creates a girl who is cold and stubborn on the surface but tremulous and agonized at heart.

Leo Penn is excellent as the soldier. His matter-of-fact approach to the Girl, his abrupt defiance of insults, his efforts to belong in the circles of the "conquered," are all handled with entire naturalness. The last moment of his painful realization of what has happened to the Girl is quite the most moving instant of the performance.

Felice Orlandi does a fine job as an embittered young Italian who searches for honesty. Most of his performance has to be quite stony. When he cuts loose the blaze is real.

Lola D'Annunzio is fine as the complacent hostess and Carl Harms has some amusing moments as her wise husband.

"THE GIRL ON THE VIA FLAMINIA"

Play by Alfred Hayes, based on his novel; staged by Jose Quintero; scenery and costumes by Keith Cuerden; lighting by Noah Kalkut; presented by the Circle in the Square February 9, 1954. The cast:

The English Sergeant.....James Greene
The American G. I.....Andy Milligan
Adele Pulcini...Lola D'Annunzio
Mimi.....Emilie Stevens
Nina.....Sylvia Daneel
Lisa.....Betty Miller
Ugo Pulcini.....Carl Harms
Robert.....Leo Penn
Antonio.....Felice Orlandi
Bolognini.....Louis Guss
Carabiniere.....Jason Wingreen

New York Post

February 10, 1954

By Richard Watts Jr.

A Glum Liaison in Wartime Rome

"The Girl on the Via Flaminia" is Alfred Hayes' dramatization of his own novel about an American soldier and an Italian girl in Rome during the days following the liberation of the city from the Germans. The novel, I believe, was highly praised by the book reviewers, but I must say that I admired the production put on last night at the Circle-in-the-Square on Sheridan Square, under the skillful direction of the talented Jose Quintero, considerably more than I did the play, which seemed to me curiously lacking in emotional appeal.

The chief trouble, I think, lies in the remarkably unappealing quality of the girl in the case. A sad and troubled young woman, forced by wartime poverty into a temporary liaison with the lonely American, she is understandably bitter about her plight and the state of her country. I certainly don't blame her for being a bit sullen and lacking in gaiety. But she is so constantly sulky and ungracious, so insistently nagging, contemptuous and ill-mannered, despite the wistful efforts of the soldier to be kind and considerate, that I couldn't help beginning to suspect that she was enjoying her own gloom.

Indeed, the poor GI struck me as the one who had chief reason to be gloomy. An amazingly patient and long-suffering youth, he put up with the girl's sulks with splendid tolerance and did everything possible to be sympathetic, gentle, understanding and generous. And all that he got in return were insults, petulance, contempt and a constant assault on his country as stupid, boorish, bullying and responsible for all the horrors of war and the unhappy condition of post-Mussolini Italy. I thought he bore it with gallant fortitude.

Mr. Hayes, of course, is extremely sympathetic toward both the girl and Italy, but it is possible that he goes too far for the good of his case. When a sad Italian ex-officer kept bemoaning the way his land had been treated by the brutal Americans, I started hoping that the American would ask him about his countrymen in Ethiopia and Spain, which would no doubt have been an unfair question, but no more unfair, to say the least, than his own tirades.

It is true that Mr. Hayes was not writing a political play, and the remarks of his characters do not necessarily represent his point of view. But he was also attempting to set down a drama that would create sympathy for both Italy and his heroine, and it is my impression that, by the constant nagging of the Americans by the girl and the ex-officer, he not only causes the spectator to begin challenging him on the background of the war but makes the young woman an unsympathetic scold. I think he thus defeats both of his ends.

There is certainly no criticism to be made of the acting. Leo Penn is especially good as the luckless GI, indicating once more that he is an oncoming young player of much promise. Betty Miller has a tougher time with the role of the sullen heroine, but she has effective quietness and simplicity. The others are well cast, and there should be a word for Lola d'Annunzio and Carl Harms as two elderly and tolerant Italians. The Circle-in-the-Square knows how to stage plays imaginatively, and I wish I liked the current result more.

The New York Times

April 6, 1954

Theatre: Uptown 'Circle'

'The Girl on the Via Flaminia' Loses Nothing in Proscenium Staging

By BROOKS ATKINSON

NOW that the Circle In the Square has been moved into the Forty-eighth Street Theatre, playgoers who are interested have a unique opportunity to compare arena staging with proscenium staging. The play is the same one that was delighting so many people downtown before the Fire Commissioner condemned the slum in Sheridan Square. It is Alfred Hayes' "The Girl on the Via Flaminia." The cast is the same, still under José Quintero's direction.

Although the scenery and the lighting are now credited to Klaus Holm, there is no radical difference except that the backstage wall and the sides have been masked, and there is more room, especially for the upstairs bedroom in Mama Pulcini's house. Despite the substitution of formal staging in a Broadway house for the informality and intimacy of arena staging in the Village, there is less difference in the total effect than you might suppose.

"The Girl on the Via Flaminia" is still a warm, human portrait of the impact of footloose American soldiers on Italian civilization, written discursively by a man with an understanding heart. The performance is still casual and honest. The great technical experiment of changing the style of production to a proscenium stage is almost imperceptible.

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Downtown the setting was practically negligible, hardly more than the definition of playing areas with props. Projected on a picture-frame stage, the revised setting at first looks mournful and random. On Broadway we are used to slicker settings with a lot of detail and color. But the importance attached to elaborately built sets on Broadway may, in fact, be one of the great illusions. Imposing sets introduce visual standards of comparison that militate against some kinds of acting. A performance in a low key, like the one for "The Girl on the Via Flaminia," might look feeble amid forceful surroundings. If you are going to have a full-scale realistic set you had better have a dynamic performance, garnished with violence if possible.

Whether the makeshift setting at the Forty-eighth Street is a measure of economy or the result of a plan, it does not compete with the acting, and it is useful to a performance that evokes an intangible mood.

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In some respects, "The Girl on the Via Flaminia" is like the ballad of a sad cafe. A lonely American soldier and a hungry Italian girl try to make an arrangement that will make life a little better for both. That turns out to be impossible. Decent people cannot make cynical arrangements that involve love. Mr. Hayes has told his story in a style that is almost like an improvisation. His exposition of the viewpoints that clash is extraordinarily penetrating. It rises out of homely situations that are rooted in simple truths—some of the situations being humorous, some angry, but all of them poignant and touching.

Eschewing showmanship, Mr. Quintero has directed a relaxed performance that is full of variety and humanity. It contrasts the candor and basic goodwill of an American soldier with the fiery temperament and also the forgiveness of some unpretentious Italian people. On the formal stage uptown, Leo Penn, Betty Miller, Lola D'Annunzio, Felice Orlandi, Carl Harms, Sylvia Daneel and their associates play as familiarly as they did downtown.

"The Girl on the Via Flaminia" is one of the most thoughtful and disarming plays of the season. If it had been put on originally with all the smartness and electricity of a conventional Broadway production, it is possible that neither the audience nor the actors would have noticed how good it is. The wisdom and grace might easily have been outdazzled by the glamor.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune
February 10, 1954

Circle in Square Presents 'Girl on the Via Flaminia'

By Walter F Kerr

IT MAY BE that we won't have to bother developing new playwrights. Our novelists are clearly prepared to take over.

Following the stimulating example of Calder Willingham and Herman Wouk, whose adaptations of their own books have made various kinds of Broadway history this season, Alfred Hayes has now gone to work on his best-selling "Girl on the Via Flaminia." The Circle-in-the-Square players found it fresh, workable, warmly rewarding stuff last night.

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Mr. Hayes' special field of investigation is wartime romance in occupied Italy, and the author might easily have offered us one of those sad and sentimental little stencils about fly-by-night love. He hasn't. Mr. Hayes is reasonably tough-minded about the way that the world is, and about the people who suffer its random cruelties.

His American soldier, lonely in Rome and in need of a girl, is a fellow with wary eyes, a quizzical smile, and a sharp and stinging tongue. ("You may have Leonardo da Vinci; we've got U. S. Steel.") The Italian girl who is hungry enough to live with him in exchange for coffee and chocolate is no wide-eyed waif. She is alive with spite, "in anger with God," contemptuous of herself, her shabby nation, and the coolly generous conquerors who have taken over. This disheveled Lisa, in black cotton stockings and battered coat, finds everything harsh—even American endearments. (As she points out, the tenderest American phrases are pronounced with the teeth.) She is sharp in return.

As Betty Miller and Leo Penn play these tense and embittered lovers, a cutting honesty takes hold of the play and carries it, with sometimes quiet and sometimes fiery conviction, to its terse and touching end. What has seemed a simple enough domestic arrangement becomes complicated by the girl's pride, by the soldier's drowsily growing love for his 'wife,' by circumstance which bring the Italian police thundering down on the liaison.

Toward the end of an affecting evening, Mr. Penn sits tensely at a kitchen table and puts the girl he has lived with through an anguished inquisition, hammering out the truths of their relationship in a series of unanswerable questions, tearing himself and the girl apart in an effort to understand what it is they feel toward one another. It is a fine scene, pulling together the play's elusive and tangled emotional threads and subtly implying—in the hopelessness and mounting fury of each angry question—the inevitable estrangement to come.

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For all their edgy bickering, sudden outbursts, and barely perceptible kindnesses, the players have engaged our active sympathies throughout. Mr. Penn suggests a troubled depth beneath a guarded manner; Miss Miller illuminates moment after moment with fragile flashes of dignity. And the supporting company, under Jose Quintero's revealing direction, brings a whole milieu to intelligible life. Lola D'Annunzio's live-and-let-live housekeeper, Felice Orlandi's proud young patriot, Sylvia Daneel's professional harlot—all are vivid portraits in the Circle-in-the-Square tradition. (An excellent one.)

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Play and production have minor flaws. Mr. Hayes' characters occasionally find it necessary to indulge in little background lectures on the woes of a conquered nation. The author may have kept a chip on his heroine's shoulder just a little too long; Lisa relaxed might be a welcome momentary image. And the fluid vigor of both writing and staging found this reviewer, for the first time, longing for a wide-open proscenium arch. You'll do a bit of craning to keep up with these restless people.

But the craning is worth it. "The Girl on the Via Flaminia" is accurate, earthy and absorbing theater.

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A Brilliant Performance

By JOHN McCLAIN

THE Circle In The Square, in Greenwich Village, is an oversized drawing room in which the audience is seated almost informally on three sides of the players. Effects are obtained with suggestive sets and an elaborate system of lights, operated from a control booth. It is intimate theatre, but under the skilled direction of Jose Quintero it is never amateurish, and last night they gained new stature with the production of "The Girl On The Via Flaminia," a play by Alfred Hayes, adopted from his best selling novel.

This is a thoroughly provocative and incisive consideration of the problems confronting a GI and an Italian girl in Rome just after the liberation. It is performed with brilliance and compassion by a platoon of capable actors and is well worth the excursion to Sheridan Square.

Tragic Note

The main theme of Mr. Hayes' story deals with an American sergeant who arranges to stay with a middle-class Italian girl in the apartment of a Roman family. The lad is lonely; the girl is hungry. She gives him love, he gives her chocolate bars and coffee, and the family are willing to accept the fact that they are married.

But then the Carabiniere arrive and when no marriage papers are produced the girl is hustled off to the clink and registered as a prostitute. When she returns, utterly degraded by the experience, the sergeant realizes that he loves her.

But before he can formalize the marriage she has sneaked out the back door and, it is suggested, plunged into the Tiber or otherwise dispatched herself.

Against this central conflict there is the ebb and flow of the highly emotional personalities in the household; a fiery brother who was wounded fighting for Italy and despises his countrywomen who dally with the Americans; a philosophical cockney who just wants another bottle of vino; the mother who regards moral omissions as minor incidents involved with war and poverty; a glamorous boarder who loves all liberating warriors especially above the rank of captain.

Ingenious Direction

Mr. Hayes has evolved a series of plausible and engrossing characters, their problems are simple and sincere and Mr. Quintero has moved them ingeniously around his Three-D perimeter.

Leo Penn plays the sergeant with assurance, intermingled with a sense of bewilderment at the strange antagonism of his lady love. As the girl, it struck me that Betty Miller was sometimes more mean than just sad and wistful. She may have had good reason to hate herself, but she didn't have to be so consarned ornery where the boy was concerned.

In the other departments there were fine performances by practically everybody, especially Lola D'Annunzio, Carl Harms, Sylvia Daneel and Felice Orlandi.

I don't know why this play wasn't given a shot at Broadway, but on second thought maybe it would lose much of its eminence in less intimate surroundings. As it is, it's first rate.